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# Barbie As Cultural Compass: Embodiment, Representation, and Resistance Surrounding the World's Most Iconized Doll

Hannah Tulinski

*College of the Holy Cross*, [hrtulinski@gmail.com](mailto:hrtulinski@gmail.com)

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“Barbie As Cultural Compass: Embodiment, Representation, and Resistance  
Surrounding the World’s Most Iconized Doll”

Hannah Rose Tulinski  
Department of Sociology & Anthropology  
College of the Holy Cross  
May 2017

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And, Mom, thank you for allowing me to play with my Barbie.

## **Abstract**

Since 1959 the Barbie doll has held the status of cultural icon in American society. In the past six decades Barbie has dominated the toy industry as an unmatched competitor among girls' dolls, generating approximately \$1 billion in annual sales. Originally intended by her creator Ruth Handler to "allow girls to project their future self," Barbie continues to remain a household name, and it has been estimated that each American girl owns an average of eight Barbie dolls (Newman 2013). As a cultural object, Barbie continues to re-enter the "human circuit of discourse" (Griswold 1987) with each changing public appearance, just as critics challenge Mattel for marketing a doll unrepresentative of "the real woman." In this sociology honors thesis I investigate the historical developments in the discourse surrounding the meaning and impact of Barbie's representation. First I ask, what is Barbie purported to represent and how has her iconic status served as a location for changing discourse on the feminine ideal? And, how have various social actors found spaces for resistance and protest through contesting Barbie's meaning and representation? Despite the ongoing problems that feminist and popular critics have with Barbie, the enduring popularity of the doll, and the particular ways it has changed in response to certain cultural concerns, speaks to how cultural icons both come to embody and transform social meaning and power. I seek to understand the collective process of both articulating and contesting Barbie as a cultural object and the discourse surrounding the social meaning of this cultural object as an exercise in demarcating gendered status and boundaries. On a general theoretical level, I ask, what are the processes driving divergent interpretations of cultural icons, and in the case of Barbie as a site for gendered contention, how do we use icons to work out attitudes about femininity? I explore both popular and scholarly discourse to understand the process of contesting and reorganizing the feminine self around Barbie. I conduct a discourse analysis of approximately 150 newspaper articles and approximately 40 journal articles exploring Barbie-related scholarship published since 1959. I explain that Barbie's iconic status is achieved through her ongoing instruction and reproduction of social forms, while at the same time, her malleability is representative of the many ways that these social forms have the potential to change over time. I conclude by arguing that through an examination of the discursive circumstances surrounding the various stages of Barbie's development, we can better understand how cultural icons like Barbie relate to the structure and transformation of social life.

## Chapter 1: Barbie™

The history of Barbie is a history of changing forms and meanings, constructed by multiple social actors. Here I begin by exploring Barbie's story both as a cultural product created within a historical context, and as a doll imagined creatively in the minds of children. Her history as a doll is instigated by the object's position as a commodity shaped by the economic interests of *Mattel*, her representation shaped by the broader social climate of what is deemed as the ideal female, and her meaning as an individual dictated by her playmates. Her complex biography therefore involves various social forces eventuating in cultural conception, political reconstruction, and driven by a market momentum, the multiple processes that construct the world's most iconized doll. I will also detail here how Barbie became a site of critical discourse in the wake of a feminist revolution and otherwise. Her status as a material good has become elevated to a conflictual process between representation and the reception of its meaning. This multidimensional process is now reaching its sixth decade in American culture, and the doll that was introduced to us over sixty years ago has come a long way in her identity, social status, and cultural representative power.

### *A Doll is Born*

The idea of the Barbie doll was conceived by Ruth Handler under her executive partnership at the company *Mattel*. She began the project of creating a realistic doll for girls in 1945 with her husband Elliot Handler as the designer and her colleague Matthew Maatson as the producer. The company got its start in the garage of the Handler's Hollywood home, first as a design company, then expanding to build and design dollhouses and picture frames, and later,

toys. The business took off with the creation of the television, which served to transition the market of toys from the holiday season to a year-round demand. *Mattel* was forged as a player in the national toy industry when it became the first company to air an advertisement during the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse series—and this early advertisement was for their Burp Gun. Its first year made \$300,000 in sales and by 1957, its toy production profited \$9 million (Stern 1998). Even so, it was not until the year 1959 that Mattel first distributed what became its most popular product-- what would become the most globalized and iconized doll in the world.

Although Ruth's statement behind the doll's conception was not documented during the development of the idea, decades later her recollection recount her early motivations. While it is widely assumed that as a businessperson, Ruth "found a hole in the market," her motivations were driven by her daughter's fondness to play with adult paper dolls. Ruth felt that a three-dimensional doll with an adult body would allow little girls to "ease their feelings about themselves and their breasts" (Stern 1998). The idea to three-dimensionalize paper dolls was very unpopular within the male-dominated company and particularly it was the doll's breasts, a nonexistent feature of a doll's figure at the time, that was the subject of debate and which initially turned the producers away from the idea. Despite this reluctance from her colleagues, Ruth was insistent that this adult doll could have a positive social and mental impact on girls. She notes that it was through this adult figure that a girl "could dream her dreams," a concept unheard of in the 1950s. Her vision of the doll continues to follow this intention: "It would be pretty, but not so specifically pretty that girls could not imagine themselves in its place ... because I didn't want girls to be intimidated... and its figure would be what a girl might want to pretend to have as a teenager ... I wanted them to dream their dreams through Barbie" (Lord 1994: 26).

What is largely absent from Mattel's telling of the Barbie story is that Ruth pulled inspiration from another doll, a German sexy novelty gift for men, called Bild Lilli. While she was unaware of the doll's purpose when first passing by an advertisement on a trip through Germany, she gravitated to its adult body, a figure absent from American dolls at the time. Ruth's dedication to the idea led the company to employ the doll maker Yamasaki, through the Tokyo-based novelty maker Kokusai Boeki Kaisha, to begin to modify the Bild Lilli figure (Lord 1994: 31). Her body was made with soft vinyl, unlike Bild Lilli then made of rigid plastic, and constructed with the technique of rotation-molding (1994: 32). In transforming the sex appeal of Bild Lilli into an embodiment of the quintessential American teenager, specific modifications included her pursed lips, widow's peak, and heavy make-up (Billyboy 1987: 22).

The construction of Barbie was a back-and-forth process between Japan and America, where Mattel employees and engineers worked to master the cast alloy sculptures to send to Japan, where they would be electroplated and made into molds, which in turn were to be approved back at Mattel. Meanwhile, Charlotte Johnson, a veteran of Seventh Avenue and a fashion design teacher at the Los Angeles' Chouinard Institute, was employed to create Barbie's first outfit and was notoriously fussy about creating a particular image (Billyboy 1987: 34). It is unsurprising that both the Japanese and American teams were adamant to achieving a perfect product--after all, they hoped that the doll would carry the legacy as the idealized female form for decades to come.

Barbie first debuted at the American Toy Fair of New York City in the winter of 1959, where the doll was advertised to toy buyers. Like most employees of Mattel, the toy buyers criticized her breasts and sex appeal, and even Mattel's biggest customers from Sears chose not to stock her. While the doll was initially unpopular among these top companies, other buyers



agreed to stock her, and officially, she entered the social, political, and economic world of the toy industry and soon after, the American play psyche. Barbie's breakthrough is recorded to have occurred when school let out in June of 1959. Her clothing designer remarks, "Kids had to have the Barbie doll ... it just took off and went wild" (Lord 1994: 43). Her sudden burst into the imaginations and the play times of American youth begs the questions -- who was Barbie? And perhaps more so, who was she to become?



Figure 1. "The sexy Bild Lilli on her classical base." (Fondation Taganara)

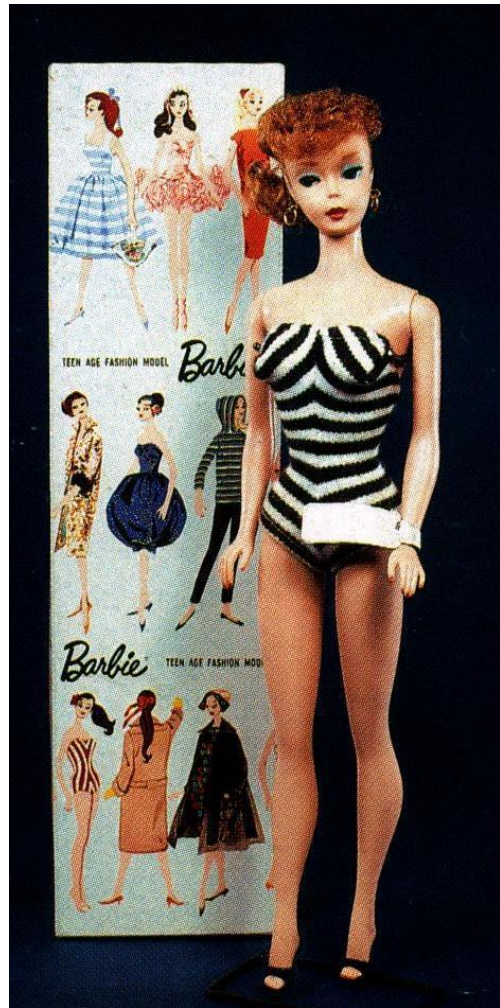


Figure 2. "The Original Barbie Doll, 1959." (Mandeville 1996: 34)

### *The Cultural Affirmation of Barbie*

From the beginning of her entrance into American culture and her rising popularity, Barbie was marketed as a real person: Barbara Millicent Roberts. She was first announced in the 1959 Mattel as a new teen fashion model,

New for '59, the Barbie Doll: a shapely teenage fashion model! Retail price: \$3... an exciting all new kind of doll (she's grown up!) with fashion apparel authentic in every detail! This is Barbie: one of Mattel's proudest achievements for '59. Girls of all ages will thrill to the fascination of her miniature wardrobe of fine-fabric fashions: tiny zippers that really zip, coats with luxurious linings, jeweled earrings and necklaces ... and every girl can be the star. There's never been a doll like Barbie. (BillyBoy 1987: 18).

In order to accomplish Barbie's identity as the next top model, her clothes were based on actual *haute couture* of the fashion world. The staff of Charlotte Johnson travelled seasonally to Europe to watch Paris collections and designed the first 21 ensembles that were inspired by Dior, Fath, Heim, Balenciaga, Givenchy, Gres, Shiaparelli, Carven, Balmain, and Saint Lauren, as well nearly all the clothes marketed in the following years (BillyBoy 1987: 22). Ruth's vision for Barbie's ensemble included a basic vision of Barbie, including "a bridal gown, a tennis dress, ballerina outfit, and something for a football game," and also came to include sleepwear and clothes for homemaking. Charlotte Johnson's expertise added the "elegance of style" appropriated for a teen fashion icon, and because the early outfits were not mass-produced, they were carefully crafted with attention to zippers, hand-sewn labels, silk linings, and pearl chokers (BillyBoy 1987: 25). Professional stylists also did her hair, and her accessories and jewels were intricately designed to represent the most valuable objects of beauty so that little girls could use Barbie "to project their dream of the future" (Asselanis 1996). Cleinman and Sons of Rhode Island, for example, designed one set of Barbie's accessories, which included little girl size copies of her jewels so that little girls were not only able to craft Barbie's look but to dress

themselves in designer fashions worn “by the world’s most beautiful and glamorous women” (1996: 28).

At a time when "teenager" became a household word, namely in the postwar era of consumerism, Barbie’s marketed representation as the average American teenager was prone to judgment from very early on in her career. The debates surrounding her breasts and perceived sex appeal found among Mattel employees were also present in the American public, and her figure remained at the locus of deliberation. Some condemned Barbie and her iconic black and white swimsuit of 1959 for being “sleazy and scary” with her heavy eyes and sharp side-glance that contrasted with the typical baby doll of the time (ibid). Others saw her array of options as a “...sunshine, tomorrowland, the future made plastic” (Lord 1994: 43). Handler had sought to represent Barbie in a way that would appeal to multiple actors within middle-class America. From her conception, Handler created an extensive wardrobe and collection of accessories from which each child could create her own personality for Barbie; but, at the same time, the fashions were developed to coordinate with the expectations of high consumerist society. While Barbie was invented as “glamorous and American” with her sporting of high-class French designs (ibid), Handler also incorporated the basic ensembles as recognizable representations of the modern teenager, including the ballerina outfit, tennis dress, and football game outfit. By incorporating ensembles that constituted the current social roles of a woman, including a traditional homemaker design, Handler sought to represent the Barbie doll to mothers as a tool to make each girl "a poised little lady" (ibid: 40).

Regardless of the strategic economic marketing behind her representation, Barbie’s early transition from fashion model to average teenager contested the boundaries of Ruth’s desire to help girls dream and Barbie’s ability to model what it means to be an ideal American girl. For

these first-generation Barbie playmates, she "taught independence...[she was] her own woman and could invent herself with a costume change" (Lord 1994: 9). Barbie continued to be marketed with various ensembles that were each designed to constitute a different activity, and the collection grew to define the limits to which young girls could manipulate the doll and "dream" within the realm of what was socially expected of them. Furthermore, despite Ruth's intention to allow young girls to create their own personalities for the doll, Barbie began to have much more of an identity of her own.

### *Barbie's Social World Emerges*

Although Barbie was placed at the height of fashion, her status and conception into American culture quickly revealed a multidimensional personality with emotions, careers, and interests, all constructed to personify the All-American girl. Barbie's place in American life was shaped by broader social understandings of the American family. The 1960s was a high point for traditional family life, and the new technology of the television infiltrated the public eye with the strength of the family structure. While Barbie was originally launched as a symbol of high fashion, the next decade projected her vital relationships with friends and family (Billy Boy 1987: 41). This change in social status also called for a more natural image, and while Ruth insisted on a strict adherence to the original mold, her sophisticated look softened in 1961. Barbie's white irises deepened to blue and her eyebrows were curved to replace the original hard look produced by her original black eyeliner and pointed eyebrows (Billy Boy 1987: 56). Her dead white skin became a more even tone after 1959 in her second, third, and fourth revisions, and her hairstyle changed to the iconic bubble cut in 1961, fit for a more general audience. Also in 1961, despite their initial reluctance to create a male doll, Mattel responded to thousands of



Figure 3. "Ken and Barbie in 1961."  
(Mandeville 1996: 34).

letters demanding them to give Barbie a boyfriend and introduced the Ken doll (Gerber 2009: 142). The couple was designed with coordinated outfits for picnics, beach days, and fraternity parties.

The creation of this new social world was aided through popular culture as magazines and comic books created their stories together, helping Mattel to develop the "quintessence of wholesome activity blended with elegant and youthful physiques and high fashion style" (Billy Boy 1987: 56). Stories about wholesome adventures embodied a realistic suburban personality to maintain the widespread

social attitudes about purity and traditional social life, and

stories divulged family details, such as Barbie's mother's name as Margaret (BillyBoy 1987: 43). Barbie's world continued to prosper, and in 1963 Mattel introduced Midge, Barbie's best friend, who appeared with a fuller, freckled face and gave a dimension of friendliness to Barbie's personality. Midge was created as the same size but "less glamorous and represented as the girl next door," serving as "an equalizer" in Barbie's high fashion world (BillyBoy 1987: 53). Midge was revealed as "thrilled with Barbie's new career as a teenage model" and the two were advertised to go everywhere together, allowing more adventures and fantasies to surface in the minds of their playmates. The first commercial with Midge also debuted Barbie's Dream House in 1964, the same year that Barbie's little sister, Skipper, was introduced. Skipper proposed new play situations stemming from elementary school activities, and offered an imagination of growing up (BillyBoy 1987: 55). As Barbie grounded in a social world, the Wall Street Journal

called the Barbie series “a cult ... something approaching an industry” (Gerber 2009: 143). The new social ties also strategically distanced Barbie from original debates about her status as a sex symbol, and this introduction was purported as socially driven. “It was society that made Barbie -- literally and figuratively. Her world was destined to evolve, like ours” (BillyBoy 1987: 44). The introduction of various social actors in her emerging world illustrates how a popular doll came to enact many of the broader developments in popular American social life.

### *A Changing Social Context*

At the core of debates surrounding Barbie’s developments is an interaction of different social understandings about what it means to be a woman in American society. Barbie’s image, and the discourse about her representation, took shape and changed within the social and political unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. As a doll with which young girls could emulate an ideal womanhood, Barbie quickly became an object of cultural criticism. The feminist movement was unfolding and gaining strong and widespread momentum. Helen Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl* was published in 1962, just as Barbie was becoming a household name. Brown’s was one publication that signaled a paradigmatic change in social attitudes, and Brown steered women away from their traditional choices, advising them to be financially and sexually independent. Mary Rodgers, one Barbie scholar, likens Barbie to the “Single Girl” herself: this single woman is “the newest glamour girl of our times ... makes fashion one’s ally ... and doesn’t let even one ounce of baby fat ruin one’s figure” (Rodgers 1999: 22).

The doll then emerges as a Babysitting Barbie in 1963 and independently moves into her Dream House. She is purported to refuse the strictures of white, middle class femininity of the 1950s and “supports herself as a happily unmarried woman” (Lord 1994: 51). This happened just

as a similar statement emerged in feminist literature, Betty Friedan's 1963 *Feminine Mystique*, now considered the seminal piece at the forefront of second wave feminism that turned white, middle class women away from the oppression of the domestic housewife world. Barbie scholars locate her representation within these changing attitudes, and Barbie is suspected to be this "undercover radical and subversive heroine, defying the feminine mystique to represent freedom, fun, and the single years" (Rogers 1999: 39). But, as a cultural object defined by the dynamism of social forces, the meaning of Barbie was also open to interpretation. Other historical overviews purport Barbie, as evident in the Babysitting set in particular, to resemble a "trustworthy teen taking care of young child, which sets an important example for young girls" (BillyBoy 1987: 55).

Mattel's introduction to a new social world opened questions of how Barbie's relationships exemplified or defied the values of the broader society; for example, did Barbie's relationship exemplify the contemporary attitudes of family life? What did Ken's introduction indicate, and how did his character change the meaning of Barbie's representation at the peak of the feminist movement? The contention formed around Barbie as a social being was not limited to her relationship with others but also directed toward her identity as an individual and the activities and values she was deemed to imbue. While she began to take on once male-dominated careers, critiques shifted to question Barbie as an impossible ideal, including on the meaning of her bodily figure. Experts on body image have claimed that her unrealistic appearance destroys a healthy self-image for young women. Others have stated she is simply a doll. Still others have attempted to characterize Barbie as a symbol of empowerment and "the first feminist that pointed the way out of kitchen" (Stone 2010: 7).

One particular doll set cited by critics is the 1965 Slumber Party Set that included doll



accessories such as a book titled, “How to Lose Weight,” the text on the back stating “Don’t eat!”, as it also included a miniature scale set to 110 pounds (Stern 1998). This popular discourse has constituted a discursive topography of questions of representation. Barbie would soon be refashioned, and time and again she would be measured against the popular ideals of American life and her ability to conform or to contest the standards highly scrutinized.

The 1960s also saw Mattel introduce new campaigns that marked the beginning of a new reality for the doll’s capabilities within the imagination of young girls. At this time, the Vietnam War was recognized to have divided society, as evident in popular cultural discourse that was also torn apart. While some popular programs were rooted in “a fantasy of rural innocence, others assaulted viewers with political realities” (Asselanis 1996). Mattel was suspected, however, to cast Barbie as a politically neutral object and situate her identity in “a fantasy world outside of political polarization that eased to be grounded in reality” (Lord 1994: 61-62).

In 1965 Mattel introduced the “Barbie Look” campaign, in which her persona and fashions went through dramatic changes and became more imaginative. This was a time for “zingy pop imagery, fast talking horn-filled jazz number commercials, pop art daisies in electric pink, with diverse themes that into worldly cultural events” (BillyBoy 1987: 61). For instance, Barbie’s Olympics-inspired travel costumes of 1964 as well as her world’s fair outfits of 1965 all allowed Barbie to exist not in one place but rather as a citizen of the world, with costumes that represented Switzerland, Hawaii, Japan, Holland, and Mexico (BillyBoy 1987: 61). In 1965, Astronaut Barbie beat Sally Ride as the first woman in space, removing Barbie from a grounded world both literally and figuratively (Ellis-Simons 1985).



Figure 4. "Vintage Barbie in Mexico, 1964."  
(Prochaska 2014).



Figure 5. "Vintage Barbie in Hawaii, 1964."  
(Prochaska 2014).



Figure 6. "Vintage Barbie in Japan, 1964."  
(Prochaska 2014).

Conversely, Barbie has also been perceived as having become more life-like during this time. In the first half of the decade Mattel refashioned her figure with newly designed bent legs and sparked what was referred to as the 'bend-leg era'. Their redesign of her body progressed even further in 1967 when "Twist and Turn" Barbie was introduced with a moveable waist. In 1966, "Color Magic" Barbie allowed children to use a "magic" solution to change the color of her hair and clothes. New outfits were fashioned with this adventurous spirit in mind with names such as "Fur Out" and "Mini Print," although marketed "as if Mattel didn't dare admit where a real college student might wear such clothes" (Lord 1994: 62). Mattel is purported to have strategically positioned Barbie outside of controversial "teenage" activities of the era, such as teenagers who had a reputation for smoking marijuana, practicing "free love", and protesting (BillyBoy 1987: 82), and by disguising her as a "MODern" teenager with mini-skirts and go-go

boots, they steered clear of suggesting her as part of any particular group of countercultural revolutionaries. While these reconfigurations allowed Barbie to completely transform into a whole new personality, the endless possibilities left her in a fantastical reality dependent upon the imaginations of her playmates and also strategically avoiding any statement on the current status of cultural and political affairs.

In 1967, Mattel announced a new "trade-in" program that allowed children to trade in their old Barbie dolls for a discount on the newest Barbie. This program may speak to the broader social transformations in the ideal image of the teenager as well as the economic maneuvers and incentives behind Barbie's production. Some critics of the Barbie industry argue that the constantly changing line of dolls also instilled in young girls an understanding that their "relationship with things are increasingly temporary" (BillyBoy 1987: 92). However, children's preferences did not go without influence in her cultural reproduction. Every commercial was tested with children before airing nationally. Mattel purports that it did not "superimpose culture on the kids ... they dictated what their own culture should be" (Lord 1994: 42). With the changing social questions that revolved around race and gender, Mattel served as an intermediary for introducing products that would either succeed or fail. The extent to which a Barbie would be accepted ultimately depended on the audience for which she was marketed.

In 1967, Mattel introduced a "colored Francie" in response to broader social questions of racial equality. Francie was born in the image inspired by 'Gidget,' a television teenager played by Sally Field that "spoke hip lingo and ... was a sensation" (BillyBoy 1987: 78). Francie did not fare well on the market, and was not taken to by African American consumers as Mattel had intended. Soon thereafter Francie was discontinued and replaced just one year later by Christie, Barbie's very successful "black friend" (BillyBoy 1987: 82). At the dawn of the civil rights

movement and with the rise of activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, racial equality was not just a fad that Mattel could forgo incorporating into their products. Christie was her own doll to be developed and played with by those who could identify their looks with hers.

Barbie also remained at the forefront of cultural criticism diffused by the ongoing second wave of feminism. At this point in the movement women were considering the many ways that patriarchy is embedded in everyday life. Feminists--both in and out of the academy--began to evaluate gender inequality and to contest the representative images of women that pervaded society through the media. Barbie soon served as one image of contention. At the Miss America Pageant of 1968, Robin Morgan led a powerful and publicized protest in which feminists threw bras and other “feminine” objects with signs referring to attacks on the Barbie doll: “I am not a toy, pet, or mascot.” (Lord 1994: 60). In 1970 the National Organization of Women placed its formal assault on Mattel when its New York Chapter issued a press release condemning ten companies for sexist advertising. They targeted Mattel’s ad depicting boys playing with educational toys and girls with dolls.

In February 1971 feminists from NOW created another public scene when they distributed leaflets at the New York Toy Fair and claimed Barbie encouraged girls to “see themselves solely as mannequins, sex objects, or housekeepers” (Lord 1994: 89-90). Interestingly, in 1972 Barbie was represented as Miss America. In 1975 Growing Up Skipper was introduced in which Skipper, Barbie’s younger sister, was able to literally grow breasts with the movement of her arms; feminists responded that this particular figure showed a male interpretation of a female coming of age with superficial changes in presentation of breasts and sophistication (Lord 1994: 100). Similar critiques of the ‘male gaze’ was launched at the 1978 Fashion Photo, where Barbie was purported to reflect a masculine understanding of the female

experience, as it allowed little girls to both model or photograph with the toy camera and “encouraged them to internalize a sense of self as object” (Lord 1994: 103-104).

### *The Consistency of Change: Mattel’s Restructuring*

Amidst the influence of women's liberation and the sexual revolution, the 1970s was an era much in flux for both the broader society as well as for Mattel as a company. Barbie became well-equipped to endure the next decade of economic restructuring when she was given flattened feet in 1970, and “to discard any submissive undertones,” her design was modified to look confidently and straight ahead at the world in 1971, as she was first presented with a smile (Asselanis 1996). Since then Mattel has tried “to follow what facial types are popular,” and in 1975 Mattel again altered her smile to a wider grin, which became even wider and permanent in 1977 (Asselanis 1996). During this time, Mattel underwent major external examination as well as internal restructuring. After acquiring a handful of European toy companies, Mattel faced major loss that was followed by lawsuits and an investigation for fraud. Ruth was held accountable and resigned in 1975. In 1979 she was convicted of securities fraud and ordered to do 500 hours of community services in 5 years.

What did these structural changes mean for the Barbie doll? This era is noted to have dropped in the production quality, in part due to the company’s financial losses, even as Barbie remained relaxed and carefree as she enjoyed her time in the “sun, sand, and surf” design of 1973. In 1975 Mattel spent two million dollars to introduce Barbie as “athlete of the year” in the Winter Olympics as a swimmer, skater, and skier to portray that Barbie still soared as an international star (Mandeville 1996: 33). While these years were not the most successful for Barbie, her place in American society did not falter. Alongside Ken, the couple was fashioned as

“Super Stars” in 1976, a new line that displayed them similar to the trendy stars Robert Redford and Farrah Fawcett. Also in 1976, Barbie’s place in the hearts of young children, as well as the discourse surrounding her status, was nationally recognized as having a significant impact in American history. Barbie was included in the “America’s Time Capsule” at the bicentennial celebration (Rogers 1999: 5). Historical overviews frame Barbie as having “survived” social changes such as the Civil Rights and feminist movements as well as political instability and changing cultural tides. This convergent symbolism was a phenomenal moment in the history of Barbie, and despite her constancy of changing representations, she now had a permanent status as a versatile cultural icon.

### *Barbie Rises Again*

In 1981, a new woman entered the economic powerhouse of Mattel. Jill Barad became a product manager and later CEO. Barad used her eye for consumer trends to refine and redesign Barbie after the financial crisis. She guided the company to create “a look that sells” (Lord 1994: 113). Barbie’s established iconic status allowed Mattel to segment the market in the 1980s and introduce dolls with different themes and social worlds and identities, including differentiated hair play, lifestyles, and glamour (1994: 12). For instance, one cultural trend in American society included exercise and the practice of staying in shape. In 1983 Mattel introduced “Great Shape” Barbie, along with her own workout video as well as her boyfriend by her side as “Great Shape” Ken. Another key release during this time was in 1984, when the ad series slogan became “We Girls Can Do Anything,” the commercial opening with a little girl rushing to greet her mother when she arrives home from work in business attire. Mattel constantly struggled to stabilize their profits in the 1980s, however, and the last domestic plant closed in California in 1987, leaving

nine other, non-US plants, all in countries with the lowest labor costs. New versions of Barbie were constantly developed to boost sales, particularly with each year's introduction of the Holiday Barbie (Lord 1994: 122).

The market also segmented to respond to critiques about old versions and representations. Reflecting the progress that racial and ethnic minorities made in the 1970s, Black and Hispanic Barbies first hit the shelves in 1980. This development of the doll not into a separate character like Francie or Christie but into another racial identity had been argued to have “blurred the lines between race, class, and gender and it became a symbol of acceptance, identity, and power, allowing [children] to identify with something that resembled [themselves]” (Sharon Raynor; Stone 2010). This series, titled International Dolls of the World, represented various cultures, and while some critics have deemed their descriptions to encourage stereotypes, other consumers have been happy to engage with their own culture or a sense of multiculturalism.

The mid-to-late 1980s and into the 1990s marked the most significant rise in Barbie's comeback since Mattel's financial troubles. These years saw phenomenal growth in widespread national Barbie conventions, Barbie art shows, and general collectors' clubs. In 1988 the Barbie Bazaar magazine premiered and came to be known as the most popular collectors' magazine. Through the camaraderie of collectors' organizations, individuals could freely appropriate and share interpretations of Barbie outside of the manipulation of Mattel. For instance, Barbie could be liberated subversively and stripped of Mattel ensembles, and given creativity in the world outside of Mattel (Barbie Nation 1998). Ruth Handler describes festivals dedicated to Barbie “like cult activity; they are so into Barbie” (Stern 1998). Her comment that, “[the craze] is not phony, though—it's real,” reveals the legitimacy given to this type of cultural appropriation.

One distinct type of consumer is described as a ‘Barbie Player,’ a consumer who gives

fantastical and countercultural stories to the characters. One 'Barbie Player' interviewed by Barbie historian Susan Stern is named Alan, who describes his named two Barbie dolls that he names Rebecca and Maizy and fantasizes to be a femme lesbian couple. Barbie dolls played with in this manner are not constricted to one identity but may be "gay, straight, neither, falling in love, or together without rules ... Barbie allows you to do things that truly give you pleasure, despite what the world has to say about it" (Stern 1998). This form of counter-cultural appropriation reveals how the conflictual discourse around Barbie's representation is not limited to the representations offered by Mattel. One Barbie art show, for example, revealed Barbie on a crucifix. While some deem this "art", others view it as "wrong," and others view this subversion a legitimate attempt to call into question what she represents as an iconic cultural persona. Barbie art also appropriates her as homeless, homicidal, as well as involved in prostitution (Stern 1998). As a less controversial form of appropriation, she is depicted in pop art. In 1986 Andy Warhol chose Barbie as one of the subjects of his iconic paintings, solidifying her place in American society, and likening her status to that of Marilyn Monroe.

During this time, Mattel's new releases also show the contradictions in her identity as any one representation, and her new careers show strong contrast to Barbie's early identity as a teen fashion model. While social tides of the late 1980s included ideas of New Traditionalism, rejecting the idea that women can have both a career and a family, Barbie entered progressive careers to display a variety of options. Earlier feminist protests on Barbie's image may only be speculated to have influenced the changes in her representation. Her transformation into a teenager and a housewife in the 1960s led her to become "Day to Night" Barbie in 1985, complete with modern office equipment as well as an evening gown to change into at night. "Astronaut Barbie" was introduced in 1986 and "Doctor Barbie" in 1988. Barbie was not just the





227. Doctor Barbie proudly answered press charges that Barbie had no socially redeeming qualities. With her salary, she could afford the clothes that she wore!

Figure 7. "Doctor Barbie, 1988." (Mandeville 1996: 130)

stewardess once seen in 1961 but was now the pilot, introduced in 1989. Barbie even became President in 1993.

Feminist critics did not forgo analyzing this array of new and purportedly contradictory representations. In 1992, "Teen Talk" Barbie was introduced and contention formed around the statements Barbie was programmed to say, such as "Math class is tough!" -- a message that, as spoken in a 'valley girl' voice, was negatively received by feminist organizations, such as the American Association

for University Women. The image of Barbie as a meaningful

representation was also scrutinized by other groups concerned with which values Barbie upholds.

In response to criticism about Barbie's lack of concern for social issues, thirty-nine children from around the world met in New York City to join the "Barbie Summit" where they discussed world hunger, environmental degradation, and war and peace (Lord 1994: 300). Here, Barbie became the face of this miniature and child-oriented version of the United Nations and broke cultural barriers to link the Barbie doll to broader global human rights issues.

Ironically, it was also during the early 1990s when Mattel sought to capitalize on the Barbie image. In 1990 Mattel licensed the Barbie name to product merchandise and to take Barbie beyond the doll. Mattel seemingly "broke hearts" when it determined that the unauthorized iconization of Barbie threatened its trademark, and historical overviews cite a string of lawsuits aimed at controlling the Barbie image. To increase profits, Mattel produced an expanded number of Barbie-themed products, backpacks, clothes, games, and even furniture suited for playtime with the Barbie doll. The early 1990s also saw Barbie increasingly tied to other popular recognizable brands. 1987 was the premier of the Barbie Jeep, while the set

“Birthday Fun at McDonald’s” was released in 1993. In December 1990 Marvel Comics created the *Barbie and Barbie Fashion* comic books, which “deal with sophisticated concepts” and one writer, Barbara Slate, identifies Ken as a feminist. Consequently, this comic book series was ranked in 1992 by Parent’s Choice as quality reading material (Lord 1994: 155). Barbie’s tie to other companies and cultural symbols has allowed her to become a part of them, further diffusing her image in American culture. In 1993, Barbie sales were cited to have reached one billion dollars.

Studies of doll play, and particularly those related to interactions with the Barbie doll, were crucial to Mattel’s understanding of children’s play patterns to inform advertising, promotion, and merchandising. Mattel undertook “brilliant and lucrative marketing” techniques that utilized toy testing and focus groups in order to gauge stories likely to be acted out as well as general interests in certain doll sets (Rogers 1999: 100). Mattel also consulted the scholarly intelligence of researchers to increase the efficiency of their design. In 1990, a study was published entitled “Implications of Doll Color Preferences among Black Preschool Children and White Preschool Children,” which found that the majority of black children studied chose a white doll over black doll and viewed black dolls as “ugly and bad” (Stone 63).<sup>1</sup> Mattel sought out the researchers, Darlene Powell-Hopson and Derek Hopson, to help them create the Shani doll, an “authentic Swahili doll with differentiated skin tones, hair textures, and features, as well as a wardrobe including some native African styles” (Lord 1994: 172).

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<sup>1</sup> This finding mirrored that of the 1950 study conducted by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, whose “doll test” was used as testimony in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Clark and Clark 1950).

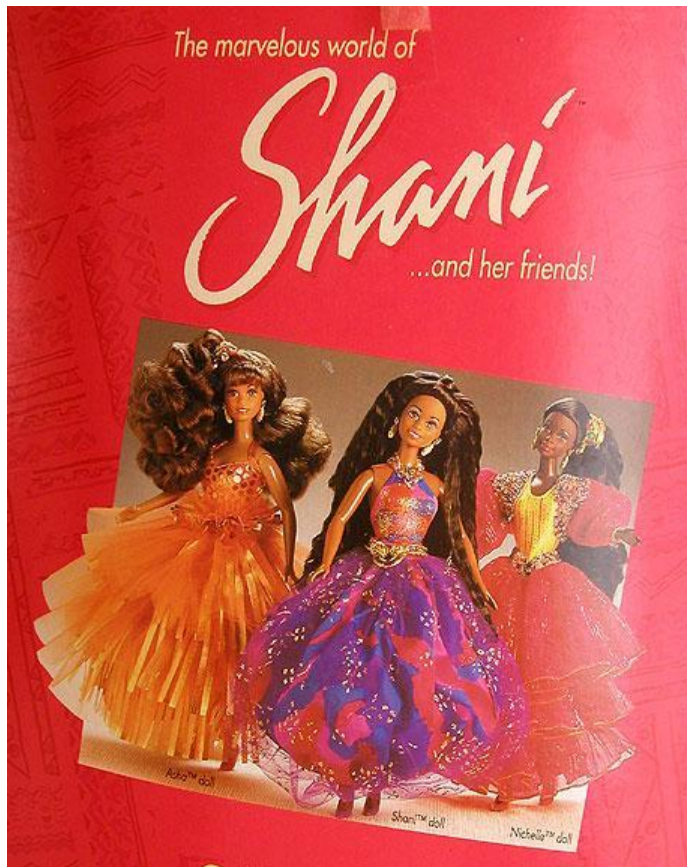


Figure 8. "The marvelous world of Shani...and her friends! Asha, Shani, and Nichelle."  
(Joe Blitman's Fashion & Celebrity Dolls)

By the mid-1990s the average number of dolls per house was estimated at eight. In 1993, a wax figure of Barbie entered the Musee Grevin in Paris, again confirming her iconic permanence, now internationalized (Rogers 1999: 5). By 1997, 1 billion Barbie dolls are cited to have sold in the history of the doll (Stern 1998). But at the turn of the century with powerful technological transformations, the interests of young girls were suspected to change and the popularity of dolls to falter. In 1999, the earlier 1984

slogan "We Girls Can Do Anything" evolved into the "Be Anything" campaign to reposition the brand. It was intended to shift focus from the dolls' informative potential to their consumers' aspirations and featured empowering messages like "true girl" and "girls rule," advertising Barbie and her friends playing sports and giggling that "they are going to rule the world." Mattel released the campaign on television as well as a rotation of eight printed advertisements in various women's magazines (Dawson 1999), all of these decisions informed by Mattel's regular focus groups.

### *Modern Power Struggles*

Today, the main struggle that Mattel faces in ensuring the continued success of the

Barbie doll includes her changing audience, which has been influenced by the changing toy and technology industries. In 2002, MGA Entertainment's competitive and fast-growing Bratz dolls began to appeal to the older Barbie fans aged 7-14 and sales of iconic Barbie products began to fall. In response, Mattel employed a segmentation strategy to target this older group and created the "My Scene" dolls, which have bodies similar to Barbie's but larger heads. Mattel has also segmented their Barbie audience through accessory products like the *Barbie and The Magic of Pegasus* film series, which is targeted to younger girls interested in princess culture (Wasserman 2005). Consequently, Barbie is increasingly seen "as a baby toy" that is now marketed to children between 3 and 6, whereas previous decades had targeted to kids between ages 6 and 13 ("Barbie Slips as Rivals Gain Ground in Battle for Popularity," 2013). In addition to the introduction of competitive doll products, new technologies like the iPhone with its accessory application and games have attracted older audiences as well ("Barbie Owner Reports Slump in Sales," 2004).

As Mattel seeks to continue Barbie's social and economic success at the center of the industry, increasingly they seek out the responses of her consumers. Consequently, the contention around her representation, particularly within the spheres of race, class, and gender, is likely to influence subsequent releases. In 2009 Mattel responded to the complaints about the previous Shani and Cultures of the World collection to introduce the So in Style Dolls, which include a variety of dolls with fuller lips, different facial structures, and various hair textures (Stone 1990: 64). In 2010, Mattel purposely sought out consumer opinion from an online survey and produced the fan's choice for Barbie's 126<sup>th</sup> career: computer engineer. While Mattel gives her not only popular facial types but also the actual career chosen by her consumers, and Barbie has proven to be a product of her time, the one aspect of her identity that had stayed the same is

her body -- also the most cited subject of criticism. Ironically, Mattel cites the interests of her consumers as the motivation of her figure:

There are parents who would kill us if we changed her basic shape, because all the clothes they bought for her would no longer fit. On the other hand, her figure does reflect the age in which she was born. Those were the days of Marilyn Monroe and Sophia Loren, so Barbie had to be pretty statuesque to be contemporary (Beverley Cannady, manager of marketing; Godfrey 1980).

The history of Barbie reveals that the secret to her success is premised on Mattel's economic technique: if her identity as a social being is not well received, it can be changed in the best interests of her consumers. It was not until 2016 that Mattel concluded that the continued success of Barbie mandated changing her iconic mold. In 2016 Mattel released three new and improved body-shape options, including 'petite,' 'tall,' and 'curvy,' as well as 24 different hair styles, 30 different hair colors, 22 eye colors, 14 face shapes, and seven additional skin tones. One Mattel executive defended this move as a way to "represent a line that is more reflective of the world girls see around them--the variety in body type, skin tones, and style allows girls to find a doll that speaks to them" (Wilhelm 2016). Mattel spokespeople also cited their motivation to address the more diffused social criticism about her impossible beauty standards: Tania Missad, Mattel's director of global brand insights, notes that Mattel "...was seeing that Millennials are driven by social justice and attracted to brands with purpose and values and they didn't see Barbie in this category." Today, the debates continue to surround these new representations as they are deemed limiting to those who are cisgender and able-bodied (Wilhelm 2016).

While the secret to Barbie's historical success is her evolution (Ellis-Simons 1985), it is in this evolutionary capability that Mattel is able to capture in generational differences—indeed, criticism allows responses that may in turn continue to impel new production and new consumption. And as Mattel responds to the marketplace, the changing Barbie doll shapes it in

turn. It is through our continued, collective, and agreed-on interaction with her that stabilizes her iconic place in our lives.

## **Chapter 2: Cultural Objects and the Meaning of Representation**

Sociologists have long considered cultural objects to explain the organization of social relationships and power. A cultural object is a “socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible, or can be articulated” (Griswold 1987: 11). As the status of a cultural object is created from our decision to consider its expression as meaningful, an object is “evidence about the culture itself.” (Griswold 1987: 12). To identify a cultural object is a way to grasp and analyze some part of the broader system of culture. By using a sociological lens, cultural objects may be studied as icons in order to understand the power and value we afford to them. To experience this social value is to be “iconically conscious,” and by feeling its aesthetic shape, our senses create an iconic power that allows us to understand what the icon means to us (Alexander 2010). Thus, an idea becomes an object that holds symbolic value to those that come into contact. Barbie is one material object that provides evidence about our culture, and before our study of the diverging ways that various social actors consider her expression as meaningful, first we must locate objects within the broader organization of social life.

### *Objects and Organization*

Cultural theorists explain the meaning behind the way we interact with cultural objects. Because cultural objects are constructed and revered as emblematic of social meanings, cultural sociology seeks to understand their place within the meaning making processes that organize our social lives. Durkheim foremost studied religious practice to understand the meaning of cultural objects within religious settings but ultimately argued that the totality of social life is organized under the same antithetical principles of the sacred and profane that he found in religious life (Durkheim 1965). The sacred and the profane are the symbolic classifications that structure

modern life; while the sacred promotes unity and morality, the profane violates these common values (Durkheim 1965). It is the understanding of the two that allows us to bind together in social cohesion. Durkheim contends that certain objects called “totems,” created as figures that represent the society itself, function to unify and create this social cohesion. By worshipping the object, the society worships and legitimizes itself. This process is defined as an the act of ritual, through which symbolism is condensed and communicated into a collective understanding (Douglas 1970). In this respect, Durkheim finds a relationship between rituals and reproduction of the social order (1965). As rituals act upon the totem to bring the group together, they exert power over the members of the social group and ground itself in an objective reality, creating legitimacy to its identity and structure.

Other scholars have worked to unfold how other types of cultural texts have served to symbolically manifest a group’s social structure in a similarly ritualistic way. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz seeks to understand how totemic principles explain other rituals and their relationship to social organization. Geertz identifies the Balinese cockfight as an activity that manifests the symbolic meaning of the social structure and the Balinese identity. “Deep play” is offered as the concept to describe this dramatization of social meanings. Geertz explains that the Balinese cockfight is the most overt manifestation of social rivalry in the Balinese social structure; it always takes place between people from opposing social groups. In this respect, the cockfight is a ritual that embodies a system of defining, representing, and producing idealized social relationships and behaviors. Geertz also develops the sensory experience understood within one’s “iconic consciousness” to describe the experience of participating in a totemic social activity as it “lifts ordinary life and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance.” To lend the concept of “deep play” to describe the activity of doll play involving a sort of totemic



principle in that the cultural uses and attitudes towards Barbie dolls may help to explain the collective process of organizing our social life around a gendered ideal.

Ritualistic behavior is connected to the process of socialization and the reproduction of social life. As a Balinese social structure is legitimized in the Balinese cockfight, for example, knowledge is socially objectified as common-sensical, even as it is socially constructed within a particular social setting (Berger 1967). A repeated ritual thereby serves as an instrument to remind the social group of traditional meanings embodied in culture that social behaviors should uphold.

There are further ways to articulate aspects of this ritualized engagement with cultural objects. In fulfilling the purpose to bind individuals in a community, Durkheim understands collective behavior as veneration, the source of a group's collective consciousness that provides an understanding, or a social blueprint for social meanings (1965). Goffman similarly theorizes deference as a form of symbolic appreciation that demonstrates adherence to this common, authoritative stock of knowledge (1956). Goffman later elaborates how individuals within a particular setting are constrained to 'enact' such knowledges as they perform certain cultural 'scripts' for legitimate behavior. As cultural theorists understand this collective interaction to serve as a key mechanism for the reproduction of social life, participation is premised on the concept of maintenance. The idea that we collectively understand the lines of maintenance is telling of a deeper process of social classification and categorization.

But, how do we know what to maintain, and what are the discursive boundaries around which we organize this reproduction? In this thesis, I argue that it is telling of Barbie's cultural iconic status that so much of feminist and counter-feminist discourse has focused on the meaning of her role as perpetuating a feminine ideal. For if cultural objects like Barbie dolls are to define

a system of social identities and relationships, then they take on great importance in the discourse surrounding social ideals.

### *Contesting Discursive Boundaries*

The sociology of religion also provides a framework for investigating how categories are created and imbued with certain agreed on social meanings. Douglas (1966) uses the boundaries of Durkheim's two poles of the sacred and the profane and applies these religious elements to all of social reality. As we infuse our social world with this moral classification of "purity" or "pollution", we offer elements that follow social convention to the former, which are imbued with spiritual value and a perceived sense of wholeness and completeness within the social order. Meanwhile, we treat anomalies as the latter, antithetical to the values that unify us and structure the moral order (Douglas 1966: 53).

Goffman further contextualizes Douglas's lines of classification incorporates them into our social code of conduct. Whereas demeanor expresses one's image for others as whole and complete for others, including one's dress, diction, poise, and emotions, deference refers to the appropriate treatment we offer in exchange to others. Similarly to other theorists, Goffman likens this process to a ritual, in which individuals "put each other in their place" and by treating one another in a way that conveys appreciation in order to maintain traditional images, they interact as sacred objects to one another (84).

Thus, Goffman proposes that it is through interaction that we reproduce social life. If form follows function, we would expect these defining boundaries to align with those in our interactions with objects. Lamont and Molnar explain that social resources are organized in boundaries of symbolic categorization (2002), such as those denoted in Douglas's lines of

classification. In considering a doll as a cultural object, we may expect that the way we manipulate and interact with Barbie to follow these lines of maintenance, such as in the cultural mechanism of gender. But, how do theorists explain the contestation of these boundaries in the face of cultural reproduction? Gallo-Cruz (2012) identifies that it is through our different worldviews that boundaries may fail to align, resulting in various interpretations and contrasting ideas in the social contract. The process of “boundary negotiation” is integral to my study of discourse as an effort to “define a contested social object as existing within collectively held boundaries” (2012: 24). These specific empirical questions about boundaries draw on more general research programs in understanding the sociological emergence of cultural production.

### *The (Re)production of Culture*

To locate Barbie within her cultural context is to recognize that she is a collective work that is “fundamentally social in her genesis,” largely constitutive of meaningful processes of production by a variety of social actors. Griswold (1987) provides a classical overview of culture as a sociological process. Her cultural diamond offers a model to understand more fully an object’s relationship within social life. Its four elements, including social world, creator, receiver, and cultural object, all share interconnections to reveal that cultural objects and their creators are “anchored in a particular context, including the economic, political, social, and cultural patterns existing at any point in time.” (Griswold 1987: 14-15). In accounting for these relationships, Griswold contends that it is insufficient to simply defend culture as a collective product; we must understand the meanings that these production processes have on the objects themselves. In doing so, she provides a comprehensive model for thinking about culture and its connected elements that include the social world, creator, receiver, and the cultural object,

allowing us to apply the changing nature of Barbie to several interconnected processes that make up our broader cultural system.

Cultural objects are distributed, marketed, received, and interpreted by a variety of people and organizations -- all of which structure a feedback loop (1978: 70). Organizational theorists offer a macro-level framework for understanding the production of culture. First, Richard Peterson looks at the “complex apparatus interposed between cultural creators and consumers,” which includes facilities for production and distribution and marketing techniques like advertising, mass media, and targeting (1978: 71). Paul Hirsch’s “culture industry system” includes the collectivity of social institutions that produce, regulate, and transform mass culture into “marketable packages” (1978: 72). His model is constructed using a feedback loop beginning with the technical subsystem, or the creative artist, which is consequently filtered through a managerial subsystem, the organization that produces the product, as well as an institutional subsystem, such as the media, which then leads to consumers. Each filter involves the interpretation of the subsequent system, such as the feedback of the media that is assessed by reviews as well as that of consumers that is assessed by sales -- a system that works to improve effectiveness in the promotion of future productions (1978: 74-75).

A basic tenet of Griswold’s study of culture is that through cultural production, an object becomes public and “enters the circuit of human discourse” (1978: 71). Understanding discourse is therefore a vital component in understanding the production of culture. To apply Barbie to this framework extends this model to consider both social and economic actors, both of which play a key role in constructing the nature of her diffusion and reception that includes the popular critical responses found in the discourse. We must render it impossible to place sole responsibility on one or the other; the social and economic are inseparable but constitute a unique

multidimensional and interactive process. In considering the intersection of the two, the Barbie doll becomes “retrievable,” the sociological dimension through which a cultural object is made available to people (Schudson 1989: 161). Retrievability is linked to decision-making and the making of certain social elements or events “readily drawn upon as bases for action” (Schudson 1989: 161).

As Mattel strategically markets Barbie to a particular audience, she becomes retrievable, and consequently, popular discourse explores the meaning and applicability of her representation (Schudson 1989). Thus, as Mattel seeks to maximize her success, the producer may alter the discourse in order to strategically manipulate the consumer’s purchasing decision. In further unfolding this interaction between social and economic actors, cultural studies also look more broadly at how a changing social context influences the production of a cultural object.

Increasing market size may work to diminish the artistic distinctiveness of a cultural object, as well as result in cultural differentiation (Griswold 1978: 78). Markets respond appropriately in order to maximize effectiveness and success and may exclude certain objects, coexist with stability, or target different audiences (1978: 79). As my focus is on the cultural realm of contestation over Barbie’s meaning-making power, I ask how do newly produced cultural forms either drive or result from dramatic social and cultural change, and how where may we locate the influence of meaning making in this reproduction?

In a particular social and cultural context, the success of cultural objects also deeply depends on the recipients that make and share in its meaning. Theorists contest the extent of influence that one’s “common stock of knowledge” has on constructing meaning. Hans Robert Jauss (1970), for instance, links the cultural and the social and proposes that cultural recipients locate objects against a “horizons of expectations” that are shaped by one’s previous social and

cultural knowledge in order to construct its meaning (Griswold 1978: 83). But when the social context is in flux, it may be inferred that the cultural form is vulnerable to transformation as well. For instance, in extending the model of production to the global scale, cultural studies contend that as new communication technologies make cultural objects available worldwide, people may interact with objects to make meanings that “speak to them in their own language” (1978: 152). Receivers of a cultural object come to it conditioned by their cultural and social experiences and background. However, this theory poses a sociological problem in understanding the overwhelming popularity of one cultural object: if different social groups have distinct stocks of knowledge and expectations, how do we reconcile the possibilities that society may have unlimited interpretations in symbolic construction, or that we may have complete submission to an object’s contained social meaning? (1978: 85). While mass culture theorists conceive culture to be strong and influential in ascribing meaning to objects, and recipients to accept these ideas, pop culture theorists view people as active producers of meaning (1978: 86). Cultural studies investigate broader influential changes in the context in which culture is created and interpreted and particularly look to social, economic, and political transformations, as well as the discourse surrounding their potential.

### *Culture and Discourse*

Griswold (1978) identifies the technological transformations of the 1950s to be a pivotal turning point in the economic retrievability of cultural objects. During this time, television was one development that provided a historical context for the study of discourse. As it transformed cultural participation, critical attention from the political left and right criticized mass culture as indoctrinating and seductive under the ideas of mass culture theory (1978: 87). Since this critical

attention to the impact of widely diffused culture, sociologists have worked to reevaluate the systems of meanings found in popular culture. With the rise of minority movements in the 1960s, cultural studies began to develop as an interdisciplinary academic practice. Sociologists began examining how mass cultural products and discourses perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes, including products geared toward children like children's books (1978: 88). While some scholars speculated that modes of transmission like television and popular music were scrutinized as violent and as a threatening influence on children, others considered mass culture as a reflecting and emanating from deeper currents in society. The advent of second wave feminism in the 60s and 70s particularly influenced academics' focus on culture as a site for ideological struggle. Cultural scholars analyzed how patriarchy is embedded in culture and maintained that the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in media images was the primary source of gender inequality (Cragin and Simonds 1999: 199).

Other scholars moved away from concerns of accurate representation to evaluate the meaning making processes behind the concept of "woman." In the late 1970s into the 1980s there was a growing trend in cultural studies to examine reception in order to understand the impact of ideology on culture. Scholars argue that meaning is not fixed but created and interpreted and consequently, studies move to investigate how reception produces meaning (Cragin and Simonds 1999: 204). For instance, Mulvey (1975) argues that film is structured in a way that all viewers interpret women through the "male gaze," positioning the representation of women as a process that is unconscious and patriarchal. Here, cultural studies move away from a structuralist approach that sees grammar as engaged with binary oppositions and seeks to decode these fixed meanings and towards the view that meaning is a fluid process that is constituted by representation. This emphasis on social constructionism allowed for analyses to

unfold grand narratives of identity, and consequently, feminists in this school viewed women as a group that is constituted and defined by representation (Cragin and Simonds 1999: 206).

This reevaluation of culture that moved from the strict decoding of meaning also allowed further investigation on how recipients actively construct subversive meanings, and scholars following Mulvey examined moments of contradiction. For example, studies have considered how women utilize romance novels not as passive readers of homogeneous and hegemonic stories but with particular interpretations and active selectivity of subversive and revengeful plots (Modleski 1984; Radway 1984). As this cultural analysis extended to linguistic elements not necessarily composed of language, we may apply this poststructuralist approach to material cultural objects, poststructuralism signaling that meanings are not fixed in the objects themselves but can be carried within the world view of the agents that interact with these objects. John Fiske (1989) has worked to break down ideas of static meaning, reconciling the two cultural schools principled upon opposing ideas of freedom and seduction. He offers such a poststructural approach and likens popular culture to a supermarket; after selecting mass produced items, we mix them with “products at home” (Griswold 1978: 90). These elements are constituted in what Berger and Luckmann (1967) describe as the retained and memorable experiences and entities that, when shared, construct our ‘common stock of knowledge’ and that, according to Schudson, would be ‘easily retrieved.’ This mixture lends to the creation of new meanings into a final product (Griswold 1978), ultimately revealing the fluidity of ideology in culture. This framework renders cultural texts as representative objects to be impressionable by people anchored in a world with changing social, political, and economic tides. I will explore here how Barbie may be one example of a cultural object that offers tools, not only to organize and maintain culturally legitimate meanings and proscriptions for gendered behaviors and identities



but also as an object around which to contest the discursive lines of these gendered prescriptions for social life.

As poststructuralists rejected the notion of absolute truths and sought to deconstruct the dominant meanings imbued in culture, they forwarded a study of discourse as a system of representation (Foucault 1971). Foucault expands the basic linguistic concept of language as meaningful to argue that *discourse* is the system that “provides the language for talking about, or representing the knowledge about, a particular topic” (Hall 1997: 291). Discourse as a system therefore pertains to both language and practice. As the former produces meaningful statements and governs the way that concepts are discussed, the latter connects how ideas are materialized into practices that exert control over others in society (Hall 1997). Post-structuralism thereby rejects the notion of the essential quality of the dominant relation in the hierarchy, choosing rather to expose these relations and the dependency of the dominant term on its apparently subservient counterpart. To properly understand meaning is to deconstruct the assumptions that produce essential qualities in social life. The meaning of Barbie’s body is a site of popular contestation and therefore, the bodily form may serve as a particular site for organizing and maintaining social life.

### *The Bodily Form and Organization*

Douglas proposes that the physical body is a metaphor for the social body and extends her theories of pollution and purity to apply to the margins of the human body (1970). The boundaries of the body are imbued with “heightened metaphorical potency—people react to them intensely” (1970: 115-124). While Douglas is concerned with explaining the control of the body as a form of social control, such as our obsession with our bodily orifices in maintaining

our personal space, we may infer diametrically opposed ideas. Douglas's lines of purity and pollution suggest that anomalies of female body, and particularly its margins, create threat and impurity to social meanings traditionally imbued upon its form -- such as conventional ideas about female representation and femininity. In this thinking, as a cultural object deemed to represent the ideal female figure, the shape of the Barbie doll *should* be telling of what constitutes purity. Her mold is systematically constitutive of the ideal female form, and manipulation of her plastic *should* be threatening to the maintenance of the broader social order. However, Douglas falls short in explaining the criticism around Barbie's representation as well as the subversive meanings that she may imbue. If Barbie's body is the mechanism that functions to maintain social order about what is appropriately feminine, we would fail to discover the contention present around her bodily form as well as other disputes over what she truly represents. This theoretical application lacks consideration that Barbie is a doll encouraged to enter one's fantasy and to be manipulated, as well as an object that is the site for great political debate. Thus, based on this tenet I expect to uncover a dynamic process wherein the discourse actively contributes to the cultural construction of the object, which will imbue the doll with a sense of personhood and identity in relation to the broader social context.

The aforementioned theorists in culture and religion concur that symbols are not isolated elements; it is through our participation with them, such as with rituals, that constructs their meaning and power (Schudson 1989). While theoretical underpinnings of icons, rituals, and totems all concentrate on justifying our participation to function to reproduce social meanings, explanations fall short to address the nuances present among how we interact with certain cultural elements. How may one popular object, like the Barbie doll, be symbolic to such divergent interpretations? How do we interact with a cultural object that is built in one image but

whose social maintenance is premised on our constant reconsideration of her status in society? The historic dispute around her form suggests that we cannot justify her functions as to represent and maintain purity, the sacred, nor wholeness. Integral to understanding Barbie is her changing cultural context as well as the discourse that surrounds her representation.

### *Gender, Discourse, and Illusions of Singular Meaning*

Beyond the fundamental assertions of poststructuralism, a gendered framework pointedly explores how systems of meaning impart, maintain, or can be used in the contestation of gendered identities and idealized behaviors. Butler's work (1988) provided a seminal encapsulation of this perspective. In *Gender Trouble*, she explores the construction of gender as a discursive practice. Several points of Butler's theory build on earlier discussions among scholars in cultural studies. She destabilizes the notion that gender is essential and stable and instead contends that gender is "instituted through a stylized repetition of acts, including the stylization of the body," and must be understood as "the mundane way the that bodily enactments constitute an illusion of a gendered self" (Butler 1988: 401). Much like Geertz' concept of deep play as the dramatization of the social structure within ritualistic behavior, Butler likens this constitution of identity to be a theatrical performance (1988: 402). She notes that one "does" one's body and its "bearing of meaning is fundamentally dramatic" (1988: 403). Like scholars of cultural studies, Butler deconstructs the traditional ideas of representation and denotes the idea of "woman" is to "induce the body to become a cultural sign within a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (1988: 404). Because she conceives the body as a cultural sign, Butler would reckon the gendered body as a cultural object or a cultural text, but in the way that it is made public and enters the human discourse--not as a passive recipient with cultural codes,

although it cannot preexist them (1988: 409). While she rejects the notion of passivity, she believes that even nuances of performing gender are not individual; the performance has a historical context and any act is an act “that has been going on” -- it is the reproduction that makes it reality once again (1988: 408). Butler likens the essential qualities imbued on these cultural codes as true and false to Douglas’s classification of pure and impure; gender is one type of symbol that Douglas would render expressive of collective social meanings and subject to social control. Butler notes that it is this feedback that ultimately reproduces the illusion of fixed meanings, “Performing wrong initiatives punishments both obvious and indirect - and performing it well reassures essentialism of identities” (1988: 411). In response to the notion of “subversive meanings” behind incorrect performance, Butler would note that an act is “not contrasted with the real,” but in recognizing that all meanings are unstable and this idea of the real is nonexistent, this act would constitute its own reality (1988: 410). Thus, Butler considers gender as “whole” and real only to the extent that it is performed. It is within the discontinuity of this performance that the essential quality gender may be rendered considered “incomplete” - it is in the disruption of repetition that we may find a possibility of gender transformation.

As a cultural object that is constantly in flux—constantly being undressed, altered, and accessorized by both her playmates and her economic producers— across stylistics and changing historical contexts in the society in which Barbie is modeled as an idealized feminine actor, the unique properties of our interactions with the Barbie doll may speak to the performativity of gender and the illusion of singular meanings of representation. Perhaps it is within the moments of discontinuity in restyling her body that we may seek the potential for Barbie to destabilize the constitution of gender. It is through exploring the discourse surrounding the representation of Barbie that we may contest her abilities to discursively organize the boundaries of socialized

gender behaviors.

### **Chapter 3: Locating Culture in Discourse**

The autonomy of culture is a principal area of debate within frameworks of sociological theory, and it matters much for understanding social change. Where Marx argued that social relations were ultimately defined by material resources and culture is a tool for the privileged elite to control and ultimately suppress the power of the working class masses, Weber countered that culture has a more fundamental structuring power- it can lay the tracks on which social ideals inform material relationships. The effort of cultural theorists to deconstruct the process of meaning making is therefore determined by the extent to which they relate cultural systems as modeled upon dominant social structures. Some theorists follow a Marxian assumption that cultural is a constraining force that limits social opportunities and action. Others problematize the locus of cultural analysis, noting that what we consider to be cultural systems, the ways meanings, beliefs, and values are tied to action and forms of social organization, are not homogenous or necessarily centralized among populations but can be quite diverse, decentralized, and messy. Poststructuralism, an intellectual turn toward questioning the presumed forms of general cultural organization, works to challenge the assertions about the functional nature of cultural forms, the assumptions that cultural objects (such as a world-famous doll) fulfill a specific social need without locating them in broader social systems. In her ability to hold a central place in American society since 1959 yet to continue to change and maintain constant economic growth, Barbie provides a clear example of how using a poststructural approach to culture allows us to explain how cultural forms not only exist but are contested, changed, and appropriated among a broader audience of recipients, because poststructural analysis allows for fluidity in the meaning of cultural objects as they move across social contexts and interactions.

Schudson (1989) concludes that as the study of culture provides access to it, we must acknowledge that our deep connections to symbols play a role in our study of them. Cultural sociologists and philosophers query as to how we may best study objects that are both materially and morally connected to our social lives. Weber asserts that we must become “value neutral” and disentangle ourselves from the worldview of the actors we study so as to take nothing for granted (Durkheim 1982). C. Wright Mills furthers that we must “make the familiar strange” by imagining all the ways cultural meanings could be differently arranged (1959). Kant further cautions that objectivity demands distance; if we “fall into the objects we observe,” we feel inseparable from them and the objects become subjectified themselves (Alexander 2010: 13). But others, like cultural phenomenologist Peter Berger, have noted that true ‘objectivity’ is impossible when studying a social world we live in (1963) and feminist sociologists of knowledge have embraced simultaneity in holding analytical perspective and distance on the one hand with a subjective analytical empathy on the other (Martineau 1838; Smith 1988). In examining the sociological life of Barbie as a cultural object, I have developed a comparative approach to facilitate an objective analysis of the meanings and actions tied to Barbie’s social location, while bringing my own insights as an American woman raised in a culture of Barbie-play into this perspective. It is through exploring the discursive field that reveals a multiplicity of subjectivities in interaction that I, as a third party, can analyze systematic thematic developments and divergences in how cultural objects exist in and can inform developments in cultural systems.

### *Data Collection*

As I began to delve into exploring the history of Barbie as both a commodity and a

cultural icon, I confronted the widely diffused literature and films that focus on her biography and the biography of her creator, Ruth Handler, and Handler's company, Mattel. Evident in these sources was the notion that feminists have historically dominated the critical discourse surrounding Barbie's representation. Accordingly, I expected that I would have easy online access to a profusion of newspaper and magazine articles from the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, including articles from sources like *Ms. Magazine*. I consulted the news database ProQuest Central with several keyword searches, including "Barbie [AND] feminism," "Barbie doll [AND] criticism," and "Barbie doll [AND] culture," all of which contained results from the year 1980 and after. Accordingly, I sought 1959-1979 data in the periodicals in Dinand Library of College of the Holy Cross. I consulted the Readers' Guides from 1959, the year Barbie first entered the public eye, to 1999, the last available guide in the collection. I located Barbie-related articles under the category of "doll," which became refined to its own "Barbie doll" category in 1988. I requested any article that may have referred to Barbie, including any title indicating a doll to be a fashion model or a blonde.

To locate the discourse ranging from 1980 to 2016, I used my original keyword searches with which I consulted ProQuest Central: "Barbie [AND] feminism," "Barbie [AND] culture," and "Barbie doll [AND] criticism." Without focus on a particular quota to fulfill for each decade, I pulled the newspaper and magazine articles with the highest relevance until I lost a sense of thematic relevance. I reached saturation in my data set through an initial cursory analysis that reveals a core set of themes along a continuum of discursive concerns.

Throughout the process of retrieving the history of Barbie, I also used a revisionist method of snowball sampling, searching pieces mentioned in other pieces, in order to trace a significant data trail. In the historical materials I was steered towards pieces at the forefront of



Barbie discourse. These popular and scholarly articles were added to my data set. I also used snowball sampling in these pieces because the data would often cite, comment on, support, or criticize other pieces that comprise this discourse surrounding Barbie's representation. These data were widely linked to second-wave feminism and generally considered to be pessimistic about Barbie's influence on young girls. A similar process occurred simultaneously in locating the scholarly works that study different aspects of the Barbie doll. As the historical data noted the proliferation of research and the highly-cited pieces contesting her role in gender socialization, I added those empirical studies to the data set. Similar to the process of locating popular discourse, I also used a snowball sampling technique to identify additional pieces of Barbie-related scholarship within the article's literature review. In total, these methods yielded 101 pieces of popular data and 48 pieces of scholarly data.

### *Emergent Theorization and Analysis*

M.J. Lord, author of *Forever Barbie*, explains, "To study Barbie, one has to hold "seemingly contradictory" ideas in one's head at the same time ... People project wildly dissimilar and opposing fantasies on her ... [And] she is a universally recognized image but what she represents is entirely personal." (Lord 1995: 10). Thus, our agreed-upon notions of her significance works to both support her iconic status and paradoxically, to stimulate the contentious cultural debates surrounding her impact on socialization. Other Barbie scholars have pinpointed this property as a crucial element to navigate in our process of studying her as a cultural object. Her status as a widely diffused cultural icon favors discourse analysis as the appropriate method to employ in this study. The wide chorus of voices present in the data includes feminists, cultural critics, economists, scholars, and other reviewers, all of whose

worldviews inhere within a collective, albeit contentious discourse, pointing to a number of thematic ideals of what it means to be a woman in American society and how a woman ought to be represented to young children.

To study the ‘discourse surrounding’ a cultural object, I systematically analyze the language that constitutes and interprets the object in time and space (Wagner-Pacifici 1991). Gallo-Cruz (2012) conceives that boundary negotiation is “the discursive effort to define a contested social object as existing within collectively held boundaries” (26). By using constant comparative coding in my discourse analysis, I uncover the properties of the collectively held boundaries that constitute the limits of each core debate that critics raise about her representation, as I parse out how different groups pose different definitions of what Barbie means in the process of socialization. This methodology involves the examination of data referencing Barbie doll as she, and consequently the discourse, evolves over time and across audiences (Wagner-Pacifici 1991). In uncovering the social articulation of what Barbie represents, I begin with an initial coding to closely examine the data line-by-line, as well as process coding (linking themes to prescriptions for action) to observe and analyze conceptualized action in the data, an important method to understand how Barbie is interactional in nature. Then, I use focused coding to develop salient categories based on thematic similarity, as well as axial coding to uncover a category’s properties and dimensions of these similarities and differences. Last, by theoretical coding I discover the core categories at the foundation of Barbie’s contentious discourse (Saldana 2016).

By employing ‘grounded theory’ techniques (Saldana 2016), in which I approach the text with an open-mind toward allowing different theoretical themes to emerge and inform me about the meanings that have developed in Barbie discourse and debate, I unravel the conceptual

themes that form the boundaries around her negative and positive potential. I follow the technique of Gallo-Cruz (2012) in evaluating distinctive discursive differences and the construction of boundaries that shape the nature of contention. I liken this boundary construction to that of Douglas (1970), who grounds her lines of social classification, of sacred and profane, onto the physical body as a microcosm of the social body. Because these categories organize and reinforce a sort of moral order over what constitutes a 'good female body' or 'good female persona,' I suspect that the contention surrounding the potential of Barbie is highly reliant on moral and emotional discourse. In my discourse analysis I uncover the sociological potential of Barbie and expect that 'negative' potential will raise issue to moral and emotional consequences, such as poor socialization, underdeveloped femininity, and more deleterious consequences inflicted upon the physical body. Thus, my grounded theorizing is modified by some sensitizing expectations from my reading of feminist theory. My use of grounded theory will refine and differentiate the properties and dimensions of the emergent conceptual categories found in the data from those previously proposed from scholars of boundary work. In doing so, I will expand the binary concepts modeled by Douglas and differentiate how actors construct the lines of classification onto the Barbie doll as a microcosm of the ideal American woman. Finally, the critiques of Barbie cannot be ignored without denying that they reproduce her status as an iconic power, a meaningful entity in social life, and an easily accessible cultural object with which diverse social actors continue to consume and interact. It is this tension that my methodology seeks to reveal and articulate.

## Chapter 4: Barbie's World is Our World

Scholars postulate that cultural objects are meaningful expressions of social life and therefore represent some materialized form of the broader culture. In order to understand the contention around Barbie's representation, I sought to first understand what popular and scholarly discourse purports Barbie to represent. In the most general way to attribute meaning to her representation, the discourse points to the process by which Barbie becomes a cultural icon--a confirmation that she articulates the broader system of culture. In the next chapter I analyze how the discourse debates the relevance and accuracy of Barbie's articulation of culture. Before I identify how discourse diverges in considering her expression as meaningful, here I am concerned with which representations of Barbie are raised in the discourse and how they work to construct her iconic status. Contenders strategically choose to frame their debates around particular images of Barbie but seldom discuss the Barbie collection in its entirety. Thus, this chapter exposes how the discourse shines a light on what Barbie reveals about our culture and in doing so, how Barbie achieves her iconic status. First, what does the discourse purport her to visually represent?

### *Organization of Visual Representation*

Before Barbie became an icon, she had to become a person, one that her audience could relate to and consider as part of their American home. The popular discourse published in recent decades is largely historically focused with informative background about Mattel, her genesis, and the original construction of her physical appearance and personhood. One newspaper cites the slogan that first introduced her into American society:

New for '59," exclaimed the Mattel catalog. "The Barbie doll: a teenage fashion model!

Retail price \$3.00... An exciting all-new kind of doll (She's grown-up!) with fashion apparel authentic in every detail! This is Barbie-girls of all ages will thrill to the fascination of her miniature wardrobe of fine-fabric fashions: tiny zippers that really zip . . . coats with luxurious linings . . . jeweled earrings and necklaces . . . and every girl can be the star. There's 'never been a doll like Barbie." (Forrest 1989: 22-23).

The fact that Barbie is the first "grown-up" doll proliferates itself in the early discourse and raises critical discussions surrounding her never-before seen physical appearance. News articles explain that her first appearance at the New York Toy Fair in 1959 symbolized a new way for sexuality to enter the public sphere, one that was now coded onto the body of a doll:

Such a blatant sign of sexuality almost scuttled the doll when it was first introduced. Had it been up to the buyers at the toy fair, the ex-pinup/super missile might never have been catapulted to stardom. Sears, Mattel's biggest client, categorically refused to buy Barbie, objecting to her too-overt sensuality. It was the consumers who launched Barbie's impres-sive career, the people who saw her on the shelves of toy stores (Ockman 1999: 78-79).

It is important to note that Barbie's iconic status was not a planned trajectory for the company Mattel. In fact, this potential paradigm shift led to great ambivalence for the company, and the doll would have never been developed if it were not for Ruth Handler's ambitious drive to make her vision a reality. Mattel's reluctance to pursue her project emanates from Barbie's cultural roots as an adult doll. As journalists, critics, and scholars alike attribute her early genesis to the Bild Lilli German sex doll, the discourse reveals the process through which her distributors had to make her different *enough* from the Lilli doll to not only secure the claim that there had "never been a doll like Barbie" but to distance Barbie from the symbolic representation of Lilli. In fact, it is widely cited that Mattel was cognizant of the way that mothers of first generation Barbie doll owners would be particularly skeptical of the Barbie doll. Their attention to the particular sorts of feminist critiques that may arise in response to an adult doll was first prompted in the preliminary research and toy testing conducted by Mattel prior to Barbie's 1959 release. During

this time, marketing researcher and psychologist Dr. Ernest Dichter reported a high level of apprehension amongst mothers, and he recommended that Mattel co-opt the adult body in a way to stress the “instructive” role of her appearance:

Convince Mom that Barbie will make a "poised little lady" out of her raffish, unkempt, possibly boyish child. Underscore the outfits' detailing, and the way it might teach a roughneck to accessorize. Remind Mom what she believes deep down but dares not express: Better her daughter should appeal in a sleazy way to a man than be unable to attract one at all. (Dichter 1959: 74).

Here, the doll gains a socializing function but one that resonates with a particular audience.

During this initial focus group, it was revealed the underlying tension that resulted from the rise of the adult doll, and Mattel responded to these concerns in devising their subsequent marketing strategy. Before doing so, however, the company navigated an extensive process to reconstruct the Lilli doll, one that accounted for a new audience of not only young girls but also those with the prerogative to debate the appropriate boundaries of female representation.

The discourse is fascinated by the early production process and the involved moral deliberations surrounding which bodily representations were sensitive to sexualization. When designing the adult doll, it was “impossible to avoid the issue of sex ... so unlike her prototype, Barbie gives the appearance of sexuality without sex itself” (Ockman 1999: 78-79). This strategic design is apparent in one of Barbie’s most remarked upon physical attributes: her breasts, which do not have nipples. The boundaries of socialization--literal, physical boundaries in this case--had not been concretized but were under constant scrutiny and revision.

In the first stages of production, Japanese factory workers repeatedly added nipples to Barbie prototypes until designer Jack Ryan sent a model back with the nipples smoothed away (he used a nail file). If at first glance it appears that Barbie has the same preadolescent genitals as her little sister, a more careful look reveals this not to be the case (both in front and in back, there is definition we don’t find in Skipper’s body). Children playing with Barbie and Skipper can understand the distinction between an adolescent and a preado-lescent body in explicitly sexual terms. (Ockman 1999: 79).

Here, Ockman explains the sensitivity surrounding the physical boundaries of Barbie's molding design. The appropriate boundaries of socialization repeatedly underwent several deliberations as factory workers continued to add the nipples that were later smoothed away and sent back multiple times. This process reveals how Mattel used a deliberate strategy to extend her boundaries far *enough* to distinguish her physical maturity from that of her younger counterpart. At the same time, the construction of her body involved a conscious choice to eliminate any explicit representations of female sexuality, including nipples and genital markers. These efforts worked to both distinguish a new, meaningful category of age, while also demarcating her capabilities to reveal an overt sexual nature.

Griswold's cultural diamond (1978) provides an analytical device for understanding this relationship between culture and society and the ways that it reveals the solidification of her status. In addition to the early deliberations surrounding the new physical nature of the adult doll, the shift from the baby doll opened new ways of understanding which items must be sold and attached to play situations. It was no longer appropriate for her distributor to market the same accessories that comprise the world of baby dolls, such as cribs, high chairs, and bottles. Here, her producers are positioned within the diamond to dictate the direction of her identity as a cultural product. By exploring which items and activities are discursively connected to the Barbie doll, we are exposed to broader understandings of Barbie's adult representation, as well as how--or if--she is understood to symbolize the broader social reality.

Barbie was first introduced as a teen fashion model. Following a reluctant acceptance into the toy market, the never-before-seen doll sat on store shelves for the first half of 1959. The discourse identifies that it was not until summer rolled around in June of 1959 that Barbie became an "instant sensation" among young girls. This moment of instant success provided the

critical reception that would confirm the solidification of her iconic status. Once school let out and girls were given more time to play, Barbie reached this celebrity status that appropriately fit with the sorts of items attached to her name. As a new paradigm for female representation, the discourse reveals how extensive decision-making was not only a matter of her bodily, physical molding, but also her collection's design that coded onto broader representations of status and class. Discourse persisted throughout the 20th century to investigate the team in charge of designing the items that formed her premise as a fashion doll:

What kind of "fashion" is it? I had heard that Charlotte Johnson, Barbie's head clothes designer, had designed for the movies. Yes! Barbie's wardrobe resembles, still, the fifties Hollywood star's, Doris Day, in those swanky satins and furs, babbling her sexless way. Pillow Talk Barbie is, after all, the ultimate Hollywood glamor puss. (Troy 1971: 53).

In 1959 the basic Barbie doll was \$3 and included the doll, a striped jersey swimsuit, sunglasses, pearl earrings, shoes, and a pedestal "to keep Barbie on her toes for all fashion shows." Her box illustrated for girls the various ensembles sold separately. With prices ranging from \$1.75 to \$6.50, they reflected the Paris couture and high fashion of the top model and included "every conceivable accessory, from undergarments, hosiery, and jewelry to gloves, hair ribbons, and even pet dogs." (Forrest 1989: 23). Her first ensembles included "Sweet Dreams" with an elaborate baby doll gown and embroidered panties with satin bows, as well as "Gay Parisienne," modelled by Hubert de Givenchy's bubble dress in polka-dotted silk taffeta. High fashion continued into the sixties with the discourse noting memorable dazzling evening gowns titled "Enchanted Evening," a Marilyn-Monroe-inspired floor-length gown with a white fur collar, as well as "Solo in the Spotlight," a black sequined gown. 1965 saw her wear a tailored tweed suit titled "Saturday Matinee" and another ensemble influenced by the House of Dior titled "Gold and Glamour." This representation of material status corresponded with a social treatment



similar to that of a celebrity. Barbie is noted to receive several thousands of letters every month, written by girls asking for advice (Zinsser 1964: 72). She also maintains a National Fan Club, and even falls victim to fashion criticism, apparent in one article that criticizes her decision to wear plastic shoes. We see how it is Barbie, not Mattel, who receives the criticism of which materials are attached to her identity. From her introduction in 1959 to the mid-1960s, her representation clearly defined and legitimized by the material goods deeply connected to her high social status.

Further discursive attention to Barbie as the “first doll of her kind” are interested in exploring the way that children engage with the doll collection and to what extent these new “mature” items support a new form of play. What does this new form of play look like? What meanings are symbolically conveyed when playing with an adult doll? In exploring these questions, the discourse represents a range of perspectives contemplating the extent that the Barbie doll represents a tool for self-expression. For example, in distancing herself from the baby doll, Barbie’s visual representation is more so left to be constructed by her playmate, who is provided an outfit for each one of the activities in which she is expected to participate. An article from 1964 ponders the way that her fashion is directly connected to potential social engagements:

She is infinitely well-dressed. More than 50 outfits await her pleasure--and few girls are more pleasure-bound than she. Is she going to the theater? Then she will wear her green satin skirt and bolero jacket. Or should she wear her magenta satin dress with off-the-shoulder blouse and pink glitter shoes and rhinestone earrings? Or her white and gold brocade sheath with fur cuffs and matching fur hat with pearl trim? Decisions, decisions. Is she giving a dinner party? Then she will wear her hostess set with gold metallic net hostess coat and gold wedgies. Is she going to the beach? She has a gold-striped lame swimsuit with matching bandanna, earrings and white high-heeled shoes. Is she by any chance going to sing in a nightclub? She has just the combination: strapless black evening sheath, long black gloves, black shoes, pink scarf, necklace and microphone. She even has a “natural mink” jacket. (Zinsser 1964: 72).

The objectives of Ruth Handler, the cultural creator, are framed around the doll's potential representation to be "left up to" the young girl. As she watched her daughter and her friends playing with paper dolls she found that they were "projecting their futures onto the doll." Handler is famously quoted to explain that the Barbie doll becomes "an extension of the girls ... through the doll the little girl could be anything she wanted to be" (Zinsser 1964: 73). But, she was also somewhat intended to offer instructive potential. The cultural diamond offers a framework to work through this tension in meaning making and to underpin the systematic processes at play. Ultimately, the object and the cultural receivers are anchored in the social world in a way that initially limited the number of representations available. The representation that is "left up to" the young girl therefore works to as a socialization tool that pointed directs towards acceptable choices.

Despite Ruth Handler's intentions to create an autonomous platform for girls to express their desires--which she assumes are also separate from broader social constructions--it is quite problematic to argue that the Barbie doll's meaning and impact are arranged and determined on an absolutely individual basis. As the cultural creator, Mattel provides Barbie with the tools that are used to create a "fantasy" person and indeed, it is within the range of the collection of these materials that Barbie's personhood is constructed and roles are enacted. The flipside to Handler's perspective, and those that agree with her, is the notion that this marketed collection of accessories and "things" confines Barbie to a limited range of identities, and thereby represents a traditional understanding of the American woman's place in society. This other extreme is presented in discursive arguments that attribute the nature of children's play and the general socialization of children to an implicit value system of the toy industry. In this way, "fantasies"

are not free, autonomous desires but derive from a broader system that gives value to particular aspirations:

Their [young girls'] fantasies, as they play, are directed by a corporation located at Hawthorne, in South California. The fantasies remove the children from little girlhood and transport them into what they regard as a teen-age Utopia. (Bess 1965: 26).

Here, Bess argues that in the process of playing with Barbie, the Mattel Corporation “educates” her playmates, who adopt a value system that is shaped by the corporation’s expectations and philosophies. Her status as an icon leads to this contention over what symbolic instructions can be derived from her representative form. These two arguments, the first presented by Ruth Handler and the second seen in a 1965 Ramparts Magazine, represent the two poles of the overarching debate surrounding the autonomy of the Barbie doll. While Ruth Handler aims for her cherished creation to liberate young girls from social constraints, her opponents use a top-down approach and designate the broader production company to not only introduce but also to impose on young girls a distinct collection of social values.

This landscape of debate allows us to keep in mind the broader frameworks through which discursive attention is paid to Barbie’s particular representations. As contenders form their debate in reference to one of these broader cultural perspectives, there also exists a temporal dimension to her visual representation. The notion that the Barbie doll is connected to feminine performance and the ability and/or limitation to partake in certain activities is further complicated when we look at the collection holistically and historically. To provide an accurate portrayal of how the discourse understands Barbie’s visual representation necessitates investigating how Barbie’s ensembles have changed over time. For example, the discourse reveals that the years 1963 to 1965 were a transitory period when Barbie’s role as a vehicle for fashion began to expand. In the relationship between object and creator, Barbie’s distinctive

character drove Mattel to re-work her collection--in response to the broader social world--in particular ways. For example, because her distinct size made her unfit to use other conventional doll items, Mattel was required to create a new line of non-fashion accessories tailored to her dimensions and explicitly intended for young girls to use for their Barbie Doll. The discourse critically connects these non-fashion items to her new form of representation and the way that she took on a distinctive character.

So Barbie acquired recreational equipment-a dune buggy, a Volkswagen van, a swimming pool. She also acquired some friends- P.J. and Skipper- and most important of all Barbie found a boyfriend- Ken. With the addition of these friends to share her fun Barbie's need for equipment became as unlimited as the needs of any modern consumer. Barbie could ski, camp, swim, skate, cycle, perform gymnastics, boat, dance, shop, have her hair styled, or just entertain friends in her studio bedroom, her country home, or her penthouse apartment. Almost any activity open to today's teenagers became available to Barbie, and by extension became available to those who brought Barbie into their lives. (Cox 1977: 304).

By identifying an extensive range of new accessories and additions to her social world, the discourse assumes that the cultural receiver is offered more opportunity to construct a fantastical play situation. This particular passage purports that Barbie represents a young and active female that consumes materials in an effort to participate in more activities; in doing so, the discourse suggests that Barbie's consumption practices provide a palette of options for her playmates to choose her activities and to explore a more extensive range of fantasies. Alternatively, other discourse argues that the reconstruction of the Barbie collection in 1965 attributed a more static character to the Barbie Doll that was marked by a distinct form of personhood and more concrete roles and responsibilities; in doing so, the discourse suggests that Barbie's new form of personhood and more definitive character provided a representation of the appropriate form of womanhood at the time.

Furthermore, critics often limit their argument to revolve around one particular Barbie

model, yet they apply their notion of her constrained identity to the entire collection:

Last year she appeared in stores looking like a co-ed in a red-jersey swimsuit. But in the 1965 deluxe model, she has been promoted; she looks very much like a bored but well-subsidized suburban matron: she sits in a stylish garden swing, beside a planter, wearing a pink swimsuit with a matching, fluffy bathing hat, matching earrings, and matching high-heeled pumps. She looks as though she were waiting for a lover (the kind who would bring her a dozen American Beauty roses, sits at her feet all evening long and never go near her bedroom). Mattel's assumption seems to be that Barbie is ready now to settle down in the grand manner and that, during the year, millions of fathers will rally to buy her the Mattel trousseau. It retails at about \$20. It's very nice. Barbie is even provided with a plastic bouquet; Ken's tuxedo comes with a cummerbund; Midge and Skipper have matching bridesmaid dresses (1965 Bess: 26).

This critic uses one of the early models in order to argue that the Barbie collection has been rethought to better replicate traditional domestic roles of the American housewife. Here, the cultural creator is purported to maintain the object's sense of fit within its social world in order to maintain its prescriptive role-defining status. Interestingly, the choice to highlight this model for debate is a notable exception to the common assumption that Barbie has never married; in fact, it is this (seemingly false) argument that opponents use to counter the notion that Barbie represents a constrained female representation.

While originally I sought to explore how the discourse understands Barbie's visual representation, I found that a more dynamic process takes place when the discourse interacts with Barbie's appearance. Contentious arguments about the Barbie Doll are not autonomous from the both incremental and dramatic changes made to her representation over time. When both popular and scholarly discourse deliberate over the representation of Barbie, particularly by highlighting specific aspects of her character and appearance, including her face, hair, wardrobe, and activities, the discourse is actively participating in the cultural, political, social, and economic processes that motivate Mattel to reconsider those particular elements and how they play into their objectives. While an analysis of the ways that Mattel did or did not meet its goals

is outside the scope of this study, my findings suggest that discursive understandings of the broader purposes of the Barbie Doll work to set the stage for the discourse to evaluate the potency of her representation. I argue that over the course of Barbie's history, the discourse is actively engaged in the ongoing debates that arise throughout the feminist movement. Before I identify the distinct points of contention, I briefly review how the discourse explains the more incremental ways that Barbie's physical appearance was revisited in the 1960s and beyond. This process points to the power and function of a cultural icon in its ability to provide coherent meaning for the social group at large. Discursive actors are the key agents that work towards implementing these changes in visual representation that ultimately act as an effort to imbue the doll with increasing iconic status.

In the midst of the increasing range of options available to construct a unique personhood, the doll's face, hair, wardrobe, and occupations all underwent several rounds of public reveals. As her representation actively participates in the reiteration of femininity over time, the doll satisfies her increasingly wide audience. Collectors identify three distinct changes in Barbie's face. Her original pale look with arched eyebrows, red, pursed lips, and a coy sideways glance was revised in the late sixties to present a more innocent and youthful, straight-haired, teenage look on a twist-waist doll with wider eyes. In 1977 the Superstar Barbie acquired an even more exaggerated, wide-eyed, smiling look that has continued through today (Melosh and Simmons 1986). In a similar manner Barbie's hair has undergone numerous changes and particularly in response to beauty trends; she has sported bubble cuts and beehives in 1961, as well as later "topknot poufs," chignons with bangs, page boys, "Dutch" flips, swirls and more natural styles, left long or cut very short. (Forrest 1989). Amidst these changes in physical appearance, Barbie's wardrobe continued to present an ever-expanding collection of fashion

trends. The original doll in her trademark striped swimsuit is suggested to have an outfit for every occasion; one critic claims that Mattel has designed Barbie as a young woman who “is mad about dressing.” In 1965, she dressed ....

as a nurse, sometimes a tweedy executive... sometimes a ballerina, sometimes a chanteuse. She likes tennis, and any other upper-class sport that demands expensive clothes (the ski-queen outfit costs \$3.25). ... Thirty-eight of her outfits are for use on social occasions. There’s a special “busy morning” outfit, a theater-date combination, an after-5 get-up, a special outfit for the sorority meeting, a special job for the Friday-night date, another for the movie date, and a really dreamy, satin formal with long gloves and a fur stole (costing \$4). The company estimates that if your child buys all the available costumes for Barbie, Ken and Skipper, it would cost her about \$225. (Bess 1965: 27).

Here the discourse begins to question how Barbie’s consumption patterns are connected to those of her playmates. Clearly, to achieve the full range of her identity the cost is quite steep at \$225, which suggests that only particular activities and occupations were accessible to a wide range of young girls. It appears that the more upper-class wardrobes and representations, such as the tennis outfit and the satin formal gown, would be limited to those households that engage with these outfits in real-world circumstances. This limited accessibility calls into question how Barbie’s wardrobe has changed over time. How have her specific ensembles and activities changed over time in order to realign with the interests of a wider audience of cultural receivers, and how has this effort worked to achieve her iconic status?

The discourse reveals the continual process of cultural reconstruction with ongoing interactions between the cultural object, receiver, and creator. Barbie’s cultural status has worked aimlessly to “stay in vogue” over the past six decades, and in doing so, has continued to resonate with and appease her cultural receivers. The original clothes were miniatures of outfits that “a grown woman would have loved to have as her own.” They were made of the same fabrics and finished with seams, linings, buttons, buttonholes, and real zippers. The designs

were in the current style, with narrow waists and either straight or wide, circular skirts. While the 1950s and 1960s saw couture trends with microscopic attention detail, from hand-stitched hemlines to tiny gold buttons, Barbie fashion soon became accessible to more and more consumers of culture. In 1971 she made an appearance as a tie-dyed rock singer; in 1973 she wore midis, minis, maxis, and grammy gowns, and in 1977 gaucho pants. The consistent best seller came to be the bronzed Malibu Barbie of 1971, which flaunted suntan lines under her bathing suit, as well as Superstar Barbie of 1977 with a toothy smile with “a likeness to a certain ex-Charlie’s Angel” (“Barbie Turns 21” 1979: 109). Barbie’s activities have also been diversified to a wider audience.

In 1971, Barbie’s athletic activities that were once limited to skiing, skating, fishing, skydiving, and tennis, expanded to include those that required less sporting gear, including backpacking, jogging, and bicycling. In the early 1980s, shelves included Western outfits, jeans, and Rocker Barbie in neon colors. In 1992, rollerblade Barbie was introduced (Mutz 1983: 228).

This process of cultural construction is not so easily directed by the relationship between cultural object and receiver but rather reflects a conflictual dynamic between competing social forces. Barbie’s makeovers--the outcomes of this process of reconstruction-- are not limited to her face, hair, and wardrobe. Her physique is notably identified as the key defining feature of her status as a cultural icon, and the discourse surrounding this aspect of the cultural object reveals that myriad of ways that the four points and the six links of the cultural diamond may work with but also oppose one another. Although her face and accessories were a constant source of innovation, it was not until the year 2000 that Barbie’s body had been altered even slightly. One critic maps this transformation:

In 2000, Barbie got a makeover, primarily to eliminate that waistline "seam" that was always there to make her more poseable. (Hey, hip-huggers and midriff-baring tops are in!) Her new body is a little more athletic, a little less bright-eyed, a little less beach



blond and a little less . . . va-va-va-voom. The breasts shrank. A little. So did the hips. (Frey 2002: C1).

Some critics expect that the cultural object responded to the heavy voices of particular cultural receivers. Here, one reviewer considers the debut of the newer, less-busty version to be directed by not only the ongoing discourse surrounding Barbie's contentious measurements, but also as a way to direct sales towards a younger audience.

The hope, for those concerned about the effects of those large breasts on the impressionable minds of young girls, was that Mattel was responding to criticism by producing a doll with a realistic body. Something a little thicker in the waist and smaller in the chest. Don't hold your breath for that Barbie. The new measurements remain (of course) a closely guarded secret, but the news is that Barbie will get a breast reduction and be leaner at the hips. But she'll also be younger. The new body is intended to reflect a decline in age, not a stand against plastic surgery and liposuction. This is, after all, about selling a doll. (Bongers 1998: E1).

This explanation presents a dynamic relationship between cultural creator, who sought to both increase venue and to appease the receivers, between the cultural receivers that understand cultural objects to present prescriptive images with instructive potential, as well as the cultural object. The cultural object in turn is surrounded by discourse that offers the object a sense of personhood, that imbues the object with the economic and social responsibilities of its reception, It is in the way the object physically responds to this process occurring amongst competing social forces that Barbie becomes a person, a celebrity even, that receives the massive amounts of fan mail each week, and who is ultimately built up by her cultural receiver and her social world to paradoxically maintain autonomy from these discursive processes at large.

It is interesting to examine the ways that Barbie's personhood is created by the processes that occur within the cultural diamond. Barbie's personhood is expressed by the many dimensions of her social identity and her defining behaviors to anchor them within the broader

social world. As Barbie is presented as her own person that makes her own decisions, discourse specifically argues her collection of objects to reveal her values of leisure activities and physical appearance. Barbie is presumed to be a consumer to demand product after product:

The clothes and other objects in Barbie's world lead the girl playing with Barbie to stress Barbie's leisure activities and emphasize the importance of physical appearance. The shape of the doll, its clothes and the focus on dating activities present sexual attractiveness as a key to popularity and therefore to happiness. Finally, Barbie is a consumer. She demands product after product, and the packaging and advertising imply that Barbie, as well as her owner, can be made happy if only she wears the right clothes and owns the right products. (Motz 1983: 219).

This scholar unveils how Barbie acquires this sense of personhood and responsibility for her meaningful representation, despite the invisible discursive process through which her identity is reproduced by her consumers and critics.

Furthermore, the construction of the cultural object is gravitated towards new directions within the broader context of relationships between actors and objects. The discourse reveals cultural changes in the broader society that impelled the cultural object with responsive changes and prescriptions. For example, Barbie's occupations and roles are revealed to express the real opportunities faced by women at the time of their public debuts. Her first job was as a model, for example, is explained to represent the constrained choices faced by women during the early 60's: Goodman of the Baltimore Sun writes, "It was the early '60s and women's opportunities were limited ... call it a youthful indiscretion." (Goodman 2000). In 1985, Barbie has taken on a more professional role that is directly related to current status of the workforce:

With her business suit and attached case, she looks like many young working women in the '80s. She can sit for hours in front of her computer terminal or charge hundreds of dollars worth of clothes on her new credit cards--without a single change in expression. Barbie, the doll, follows all the trends, so it's hardly surprising that lately she's adopted the Yuppie life-style. ("Barbie: In Shape and Dressed for Success" 1985).

The discourse identifies Barbie to have occupied a wide variety of occupations over the last six

decades, including an astronaut, an airline pilot, a surgeon, a professional basketball player. In 2000, Barbie became President.

Today's candidate arrives with a red dress for the inaugural ball and color -coordinated posters. Her packaging include sa campaign speech that could frankly use a little work --too bad Peggy Noonan is preoccupied with trashing Hillary. She also has an agenda from the White House Project and a copy of the Girls' Bill of Rights from Girls Inc ... Barbie's new job is to get girls thinking about political leadership. (Goodman 2000).

While some discourse like these did justice to expose the representation of these diverse occupations, many critics ignored these assumed roles and located her significance within other aspects of her representation. Nevertheless, amidst these discursive choices to square in on particular representations during her expansion of visual forms, the Barbie doll collection necessitates a more macro-level evaluation of the discourse surrounding Barbie's organization of social life. As Barbie's individual roles in sex, marriage, and careers are differentiated through time, this redefinition motivates the discourse to closely examine the value structures implicit in Barbie's world. How are these [changing] visual representations located within the broader organization of social life?

### *Organization of Social Life*

From her introduction in 1959 and throughout the modifications made her to body and identity in the 20th and 21st century, the discourse locates the Barbie doll as a product of the broader society. Indeed, the discourse reveals a historical landscape of interconnections between the reconstructions of the Barbie as a cultural object and the cultural objects' creators broader American context. I demarcate this history into three distinct periods in order to explain how the discourse works to "anchor [the doll] in a particular context, including the economic, political, social, and cultural patterns existing at any point in time." (Griswold 1987: 14-15). Early

discourse focusing on Barbie as the first “grown-up” doll goes beyond the surface of her physical appearance to recognize the way that she appears during broader cultural shifts of the 1950s: first, the post-World War II sociopolitical climate of democracy, and second, the new social understanding of the modern teenager.

First, Barbie’s ability to transform from the sexually explicit Bild Lilli doll is notably connected to her broader symbolism of post-War prosperity. One contributor to the *Barbie Chronicles* writes that Handler reinvented the pornographic caricature reflected this period in American history:

“... Barbie became a symbol of prosperity. As an exemplary American product, much like the house in the suburbs. Barbie simultaneously represented and guaranteed American freedom and democracy. But what role, one might ask, do Barbie’s torpedo breasts and the Lilli prototype play in this discourse of nationalist heroism, a discourse of the ideal? One might say that the genius of Mattel consists in having invented a feminine body capable of fascinating the popular imagination (and here I refer to the power to stimulate both love and hate) for forty years. This long-lived fixation is fundamentally dependent on the “adult” character of Barbie. (Ockman 1999: 78-79).

Here, the paradigm shift to construct the first adult doll is notably recognized to have been impelled by the changes taking place in the broader social world. The cultural object takes on the symbolic values present at a time of social integration in the 1950’s. The discourse implies that it is not surprising a material form resulted from this strong sense of American values in the post-war society, and this material form takes on totemic properties that both worked to not only represent the group but also, through “this long-lived fixation” to reify and cohere the broader social values of prosperity. In addition, scholars also locate the cultural object’s appearance during the social development of the new life stage of adolescence. In a similar manner, Barbie’s production underwent a totemic process that worked to both solidify her status and to confirm the new permanence of adolescence with the rise of a new material form of representation.

While these significant cultural shifts actively gravitated the object towards new values, there is a notable discrepancy in discursive understandings of Barbie's recoded identity from her pornographic origins. What distinguishes the two divergent frames is the interpretation of Barbie's age. Feminist scholarship of popular culture takes note of this tension that arises in locating Barbie's representation within the norms of social life, an outlier that looks objectively at Barbie as a cultural object to query her anchorage in the broader world:

We should begin by noticing that Barbie's age is not completely clear. Ostensibly she is a teenager and therefore is no more than nineteen-years old. Physically, however, as many people have pointed out, Barbie is a rather fully endowed and curvaceous woman possessing a figure few nineteen-year-olds have. Barbie is of course single so her friend Ken is just that--a boyfriend not a husband. Barbie's exact relationship with Ken is noticeably loose. She apparently is free to embark unescorted on all kinds of outings with Ken, including camping overnight (they each have their own sleeping bags, however). Barbie seemingly lives alone in all of her plushly furnished homes although there are certainly enough chairs, couches, and to accommodate overnight guests. Again, Ken is free to visit anytime he wishes. The point here is not that Barbie is a doll of questionable morals but we should note that her lifestyle is remarkably uncluttered and free of such complications as nosey little brothers or nagging parents (Cox 1977: 305).

Two frames of discourse coexist across the historical landscape to meaningfully make sense of the cultural object representation within the social world. While discourse considers Barbie to be a social being located within the aforementioned 20th century context, other discourses move to argue that she represents that Barbie represents the single and independent modern woman. The discontinuity of one coherent feminine representation speaks to Butler's performativity of gender. As gender is constructed through one's repetition of acts, the performance is not isolated from its broader context, where contention surrounds the acts themselves. The process of gendering the body emerges "within the matrix of gender relations themselves," and Barbie's body—as a "discourse of gender"—reiterates the stylized acts that constitute an appropriate form of femininity. Barbie's performance of femininity is comprised of "acts that have been going on"

before her models have been introduced, and it is when we look at the entirety of her collection, that we may understand Barbie's notion that gender identity is inherently unstable and incoherent (Butler 1990). Indeed, the discontinuity found between the "traditional, wholesome girl" and the "modern, do-it-all" woman reflects Barbie's gender performance as the imitation of the societal ideal during each public reveal.

### *"Traditional, Wholesome Girl"*

First, Barbie represents the wholesome American girl and her social world is an expression of the traditional, white middle-class society. Discourse attributes the material representation of Barbie's social world to the ideals of contemporary 20th century: social integration.

The early 1960s, with such TV shows as "Father Knows Best," marked a high point for traditional family life, and Barbie kept in pace by introducing her boyfriend Ken in 1961 (they were actually married in 1965); her best friend, Midge, in 1963; her little sister Skipper in 1964; Tutti and Todd, her twin brother and sister, in 1966; Francie, her "MODem" cousin, in 1966; and Christie, Barbie's first black friend, in 1968. A great variety of Barbie people and pets, a total of fifty-five at last count, emerged through the years. Each of these figures has maintained the Barbie tradition of keeping modern and in tune with the tastes and demands of teenage America (Forrest 1989: 24).

This social organization within the cultural object's world is purported to not simply arise by happenstance but moreover to be a direct effort on the part of the cultural creator. Mattel, for example, "went directly to young girls with television ads that presented Barbie as a real person. ... Barbie was aggressively coded for wholesomeness to overcome the fact that she was originally a quasi-pornographic gag gift for men." (Maustard 1996: E6). At the same time, the notion that her representation came out "naturally" speaks to gender as a process of imitating the ideal. Barbie's organization within the traditional family structure reflects not only her individual

reiteration of femininity but the matrix of gender relations found in American society during the mid-twentieth century. As Barbie was subjected to represent the ideal girl of the time, it is unsurprising that her introduction prompted the appearance of other subjects that perform gender directly in relation to her. For instance, Ken's performance of gender is not isolated from that of his girlfriend, Barbie. The discourse points to this interactional and relational process of reproducing gendered acts with and through another subject's performance. The perceptions towards Ken's gender are concerned with how his performance fails to adequately express dominance over Barbie's performance of femininity. These power relations found between the various reiterations of gender identity directly reflect those expected to be found in their broader social context.

#### *The Modern Woman: Do-It-All & Have-It-All*

It is interesting to note that following her introduction in 1959, the first critic to identify Barbie as a cultural icon describes her character to represent that of the "modern woman":

Barbie's life is that of the ultimate swinging single. Although she has no parents to cast shadows into her life of constant boating, skiing, and camping, she also does not seem to have a need for them. Total independence is a central characteristic of Barbie." (Cox 1977: 305).

The shift to attribute Barbie's representation to one of new feminist ideals is parallel to the changing climate for the status of women in the cultural object's social world. As the women that Barbie traditionally represented in their young, wholesome years were now entering the workforce, discourse revisits the representation of the Barbie doll and reflects the new feminine representations appearing in our social world onto the cultural object's representation and her

organization of social life in its entirety. One feminist scholar, Alida Brill, credits Barbie with showing her a world outside of the aforementioned 20th century context of her white, middle-class suburban life with white-picket fences. Barbie represented an alternative vision of life that she describes as "non-material model of womanhood," that served to liberate her from conventional domestic play:

Safely alone with the dolls we were in charge of the fantasy, and our fantasies did not match our Ozzie and Harriet surroundings. With our Barbies we could dream about something other than getting married and having children; through our Barbies, we took on opportunities of a wider realm. In the town where practically every mom stayed home, and where all the women were moms, Barbie's initial pre-feminist appearance signaled for us the universe of other possibilities. Gone from our agenda were the eternal rounds of playing mommy and daddy and baby doll, complete with baby carriages and strollers tailor-made for child-sized moms. With Barbie acting for us we could be exciting and interesting women in the world (Walsh and Mitchell 2000: 182).

Here appears the give-and-take process where that the object and receiver have a non-directional relationship in the cultural diamond. As expressed in prior discussion about her visual representation, discourse both understands objects to instruct receivers and receivers to instruct objects. Brill describes how the Barbie doll's representation of a new way of life--that of the modern woman--provided a new option for the way that she understood her feminine self. Meanwhile, Barbie's representation as the modern woman occurred in particular social context with increasing acceptance of alternative female roles. Here we see the relationship: the object's social world instructs the receiver and social world, and at the same time, the receiver provides instruction to the object.

In addition, the discourse reveals how this relationship between social world and cultural object gravitates concurrently with the influence of the cultural creator. Ruth Handler is identified as a key player in directing the particular way that Barbie organizes social life:

Barbie served as the material manifestation of Ruth's life-long ambivalence about gender.



Barbie became an icon to female autonomy during an era when domesticity prevailed and baby dolls predominated. At the same time that the teenage model represented the expanding independence of girls and women, she literally could not stand on her own two feet! For Ruth Handler, the doll that embodied female emancipation and feminine submission expressed the incongruities and contradictions that had framed her life. And by embodying divergent gender ideals, Barbie helped Ruth negotiate the conflict about emancipation and submission (Forman-Brunell 2009: 310-311).

This passage stresses the relationship between cultural object and creator. Barbie is purported as a strict embodiment of her creator's location within the social world; as Ruth Handler herself is considered to be a characteristic "modern woman," the discourse reveals the cultural object to manifest her values in a material form that coheres the still widely contested image of the working woman. The creation of this totemic object in turn provided Ruth with not only a representation of herself but also an avenue to diffuse the criticisms and contention surrounding her unpopular female role in the workforce. In this process the doll signifies a tool for her cultural creator to reiterate a particular performance of femininity – but the doll here is not necessarily a blank slate onto which any possibility can be made true. Barbie's performance of the "working woman" was yielded through the same forces that gravitated Ruth Handler to produce her own fluctuating gender performance. As Ruth navigated through contesting discourses in the male-dominated workforce and beyond, critiques surrounding her own femininity were never isolated from her reiteration of acts that constituted her gender identity. It is within this unstable and discontinuous context that the Barbie Doll underwent—and continues to undergo— similar discursive processes that style her performance with new acts deemed feminine.

Clearly, the relationship between cultural object and creator is encompassed by the broader discourse that is produced within the social world. As the 1980s marked the changing perception of women from being mere homemakers to career-oriented ones, Mattel's slogan of

the 1980s—‘We girls can do anything’—had a significant impact on what the discourse claims to be her comeback following her representation as a traditional girl. This slogan is considered to be a response to feminists in an effort to change her image ...

from fashion icon to woman of substance, nurse to doctor, teacher to astronaut, air-hostess to pilot, secretary to a credit-card touting and a briefcase-bearing power executive, the Barbie doll represented the changing stereotypes of the traditional woman. In 1997, the body mould of the doll was recast to give her a broader waist. Her face was modified to give her a fuller, warmer and a more friendly look. Her sideways glance, signifying coquettishness and submissiveness was converted to a straight look to depict assertiveness. The objective was to appease the feminists; the strategy—to convert Barbie from a candy stripper to a woman of substance. Mattel wanted to project Barbie as a Renaissance woman (Sharma 2008: 41).

These passages reveal the dynamic processes that occur as the cultural creator is also impelled to target the cultural object’s representation in the direction of those that motivate the economic growth of the object. The circulation of this cultural object then works to solidify the new representative image as not only an achieved status of the feminine but also an acceptable status. As the Barbie doll ricochets in presenting new acceptable images of femininity, the contested boundaries--contained within the links of the cultural diamond--are pushed more and more overtime and open new pathways for the acceptance of alternative feminine representation.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Competing Directions of Cultural Production: Barbie's Function & Discursive Framing**

In the previous chapter I briefly introduced the landscape of debates that surround Barbie's autonomy in organizing broader social structures as well as in organizing the feminine lives of young girls. As I investigated claims surrounding Barbie's visual representation, I found discursive interactions with Barbie's appearance were intertwined with contentious arguments over her representation. Furthermore, both popular and scholarly discourse is actively engaged in the cultural, political, social, and economic processes that motivate Mattel to reconsider those particular elements and how they play into their objectives. After reviewing the discursive organization of Barbie's visual representation and her social life as a whole, I now locate these exploratory findings within the broader contention over Barbie's social coherence. I argue that the discursive actors are strategic agents behind both the incremental and dramatic changes made to her representation. Keeping this in mind, I find that there are two general camps that understand her representation to serve different purposes, and both participate as cultural receivers in the cultural diamond. First, there are those that uphold Handler's original intentions of creating the first adult doll, who idealize her fantastical nature as a platform free from social limitations. Other discursive actors, on the contrary, conceive of the Barbie Doll to provide young girls with a point of reference; in this view, the Barbie Doll should be pre-constructed by Mattel as a role model to socialize girls towards a particular type of femininity. Where the two frames diverge is in a debate over where and how culture is constructed and over the impact of which actors participate as cultural agents in the reorganization of femininity.

This chapter explores the boundaries between these two ways to conceive the purpose of the Barbie Doll. I argue that these discursive understandings of the broader purposes of the

Barbie Doll work to set the stage for debating the potency of her representation. In the next chapter I will then locate these points of divergence that suggests the act of participating in Barbie discourse is an exercise of working out cultural conflicts over femininity.

*“[Barbie] Becomes An Extension of the Girls”*

The debates over the meaning and impact of the Barbie Doll’s representation implicate a broader notion about what she is *supposed* to represent and how this representation is connected to her purpose. First, I identify a salient discursive trend among contenders to structure their arguments about her meaning and impact around the claim that the Barbie Doll is a vehicle for fantasy and imagination. Early discourse has the tendency to widely cite Ruth Handler’s emphasis on playing pretend and make-believe as healthy and important aspects of growing up. Handler then intended to create an adult doll as a way for young girls to express their dreams of the future and Barbie “becomes an extension of the girls.” One way that the discourse argues that Barbie provides this platform is through her extensive collection of material goods. For example, one reviewer of a *Los Angeles Times* article purports that “Barbie’s fanciful life style and bland personality probably help make her a good toy. Barbie’s abundant possessions and costumes allow her to be whatever the little girl wants her to be. The possibilities are endless.” (Gellene 1989). Barbie’s ability to present “endless possibilities” speaks to Berger and Luckmann’s social construction of reality that explains her production within the social order to be prone to a fluid and ongoing reconstruction. This process not only occurs on the part of cultural receivers that utilize her abundant possessions and costumes but also the company that makes them publicly accessible. In fact, scholarship is deeply engaged with the marketing discourse produced by the overarching distributor of these possessions. Mattel is an active contributor to the discourse that

purports how and to what extent Barbie organizes social life. Despite the ways that the discourse in the previous chapter locate Barbie as a female whose life is deeply structured by broader American society as a “traditional girl of the 1950s” or a modern, do-it-all woman, Jill Berard, marketing vice-president for girls' toys at Mattel, explicitly claims that Barbie is ageless, without parents, and asexual. "She is not from a place or from a time," says Berard. "She's whatever you want her to be. And that's so, so important to her success." (Cobb 1985: 11).

Furthermore, scholarship, more so than popular data, is deeply engaged with how this objective is connected to Mattel's marketing discourse utilized throughout Barbie's redefinitions. For instance, a *Pop Culture Reader* article cites the 1980's advertising slogan in order to argue what Barbie is *supposed* to represent:

Mattel's 1980s advertising slogan, "You can be anything you want to be. Right, Barbie?" not only plays on women's increased life choices but also suggests that Barbie may represent a form of imaginative escape to girls dissatisfied with their own situations in real life. Candace Irving, manager of marketing and public relations for Mattel, claimed that "Barbie is every little girl. She is the person they are working out how to become. She is very personal to every little girl who plays with her, representing their fantasies of what they'll be as a teenager or adult." (Robins 1989: 5).

Mattel is critical to frame Barbie's consumption practices as an effort to provide young girls with a wide range of tools to construct their fantasies. It is through Barbie's connection to consumption practices that the performance of femininity relaxes its boundaries and may render a wider array of acceptable forms of femininity.

As the consummate and consuming baby boomer, Barbie still devotes herself to the pursuit of happiness through acquisition. She wears all the right clothes and owns all the right stuff. ... Mattel has heard all the criticisms of this way of life and is publicly unimpressed. Barbie as Sybarite? "I don't think that's true," counters Jill Berard. "The fact that little girls think in idealistic ways is what dreaming is all about. You don't dream the reality because the reality often isn't much fun to dream about. So you try to get a little bit above reality. Which is where I think Barbie is." (Cobb 1985: 11).

This discourse signifies cultural receivers to instruct the cultural object in an effort to

change the meanings imbued in their social world. Cobb points out that Barbie supersedes reality because “reality isn’t much fun to dream out,” and in doing so, she transforms into a hyper realistic representation that the cultural receiver seeks to make real. As Barbie’s purpose is understood to allow little girls this open platform for reimagining their lives and capabilities, this discourse respond to feminist critiques with contempt and denigration and often find humor in the fact that the Barbie Doll is taken so seriously. I find that children commonly take the stance that Barbie is “just a toy,” while their mothers are highly critical of Barbie’s meaning and impact in society. In one conversation between feminist Anna Quindlen and her daughter exhibits this dynamic:

Daughter: Mama, why can't I have Barbie?"

Quindlen: Because I hate Barbie. She gives little girls the message that the only thing that's important is being tall and thin and having a big chest and lots of clothes. She's a terrible role model.

Daughter: Oh, Mama, don't be silly. She's just a toy. (Quindlen 1994: 19).

Here, Quindlen’s daughter understands that the cultural receiver imbues the object with its meaning, a process that would allow Barbie to present “fantastical” representations aside from coherent social reality. Quindlen, however, takes an opposing stance that signifies the object to actively construct meaning to its receiver and to provide instruction. In this case, her criticism towards the meaning of the object informs her reluctance to present her daughter with its “harmful” instruction and its impactful performance of gender.

Barbie’s playmates are considered to be active participants in the construction of culture. This discourse therefore relies on the intimate encounters that women and girls have with the Barbie Doll. Personal narratives work to provide evidence of the claim that Barbie had not influenced the process of socialization:

Do the looks influence her? Does she want to be like Barbie when she grows up?

Brandi scoffs.

"No. I like the way I look. I wouldn't change." Brandi is real. Barbie, after all, is JUST a doll.

Albrecht -- who seems rather unaffected by her childhood years of playing with Barbie and her friends -- suggests people put too much emphasis on one cultural icon. She believes a child's entire experience will influence views of personal body image.

Others, however, believe that Barbie is just one of many harmful images foisted on the psyches of young girls, telling them over and over again that theirs is an imperfect body. (Bongers 1998: E1).

Here, we see the two sides of debate surrounding the direction of cultural production. Albrecht does not signify that a cultural object holds a status to "influence" the childhood years and their aspirations for the future. Her suggestion that "people put too much emphasis on one cultural icon" recognizes the other side of the coin--the discourse that understands the cultural object to instruct the cultural receiver. As these contenders understand the direction of cultural production to flow from object to receiver, they look critically at the meanings that are externalized from the object. Some are displeased by the particular reiteration of femininity -- of which the Barbie doll is "just one of many harmful images" -- a cultural performance understood to instruct, to internalize into the "psyches of young girls," and to be reinscribed into their own performances of femininity. For others, like Albrecht and Brandi, the cultural object is gravitated by the performance of the cultural receivers, and as new iterations of gendered meanings continue to be produced "throughout a child's entire experience," the Barbie Doll remains just "one cultural icon" and just one performance of femininity.

By framing the Barbie Collection as a vehicle to let "little girls dream," this cultural object and her possessions are assumed to presuppose broader demarcations of femininity as if the youth had not yet been exposed to social scripts through the many cultural sources of feminine socialization. The cultural object here is framed to work towards empowering young girls to actively transform their aspirations into material form. The meaning of culture is then

defined by the young girls and the way they project their future selves onto the gendered performance of the Barbie Doll--an ability that is provided by an extensive range of options to choose Barbie's wardrobe, occupation, friends, and other social roles. In this thinking, for little young girls to design Barbie's entire social world is for them to meaningfully participate in the reorganization of femininity, and furthermore, to concretize their desires as possible. However, this meaning of culture neglects to account for the ways that their aspirations are pre-constructed by other culture and other means of socialization. Further, to understand the cultural receiver to provide sole instruction for the object opposes the idea that Barbie's representation plays a part in feminine socialization. Her representation supports Butler's notion of performativity, as the doll does not presuppose meanings of femininity but actively participates in their reiteration. It is this tension between the passivity and activity of cultural agents that paradoxically contributes to the persistence of Barbie discourse.

*Internalization and Embodiment: Barbie as a (Performative) Leader of Our Times*

Because Barbie is slender, claims makers argue, she therefore teaches girls that being slender is desirable. But how does this teaching occur? There are at least two problems here. The first is that the process by which Barbie influences girls is not spelled out. Do girls define Barbie in positive terms, and therefore decide they want to be thin like Barbie? ... Barbie is smiling; why don't girls focus on happiness instead of slenderness as the desired quality? Why not blame Barbie's smile for cosmetic orthodontia, depression, and teen suicide? Barbie's critics rarely bother to explain just how she exerts her influence, how girls glean particular meanings from playing with Barbie. Second, in celebrating slenderness, Barbie hardly stands alone. Many aspects of contemporary culture present slenderness as an ideal for women: the fashion industry, movies and television, advertising, beauty pageants, the fitness and diet industries, pornography, and who knows what else. Even if girls who play with Barbie--and most girls do--grow up to value slenderness, how are we to weigh Barbie's relative influence in this process? (Best 1998: 204).

This passage from cultural scholarship best lays out the problems that arise from the tension



between the passivity and activity of cultural agents. As the two discursive frames diverge in the significance attributed to the cultural receiver, one frame maintains the receiver's ability to infuse the doll with meanings external to the social world, and the second conceives the receiver and her social world to be constructed by the doll's fixed meanings. While the former explains the doll's social coherence to result from the efforts of its receivers, the latter is concerned with the object's influence on the receiver's performance of gender and the organization of social life.

This second form of contention over Barbie's social coherence regards her cultural meanings and her performance of gender to provide strict instruction over feminine socialization. It is notable that Ruth Handler's early conception of the Barbie doll unifies both discursive frames. While Ruth Handler envisioned a doll for girls to dream about the future and to escape broader social realities, she also purports that the Barbie doll acts as an educational tool for girls to receive her messages about being a woman in modern society:

Barbie can be used as a communicator" to guide the little girl through "the world of manners and etiquette and grooming and hygiene-all somehow considered more important for girls." Ruth Handler closes on this inspirational note: "The Barbie concept, in many ways, gives little girls a guide to better living. (Troy 1971: 53).

A significant number of data follows this thinking and likewise conceives of the Barbie Doll to provide young girls with a point of reference. First, while I previously noted how Mattel is an active contributor to the discourse that idealizes Barbie's fantastical capabilities, the cultural creator is also an active contributor to the claims that Barbie works to resemble and reify broader social phenomenon. From the beginning of her public debut in 1959, by the suggestion of marketing researcher Dr. Ernest Dichter, Mattel worked to emphasize the Barbie Doll as a tool to instruct young girls on proper feminine etiquette. By using focus groups, the cultural creator assesses how the cultural receivers respond to particular representations of the cultural object.

Through focus groups, which take place at Mattel's Hawthorne, California, headquarters almost weekly, Barad discovered that little girls were playing at going to work. So she decided to make Barbie an executive. "She would have the same leadership qualities as She-Ra," says Barad, "but she'd be going to work, not war!" And since Barad knew that girls prefer to play with fancy clothes ("They always pick the wedding gown over anything"), she came up with Day-to-Night Barbie: By day she decked out in a pink suit, but take off the jacket to reveal a sexy bodysuit; reverse her skirt and she ready to party. (Masters 1990: 90).

This passage points to how Mattel investigates the capabilities for cultural receivers to shape the cultural object in particular ways. The outcomes of this assessment then motivate the ways that Mattel reworks its cultural creation to better reflect the externalized social realities of receivers. When little girls were discovered to "play work" – to externalize and to perform the doll's feminine role in the workforce – the cultural creator responded with a product more aligned with this social reality and with the physical tools to produce this performance, such as the 1990 Working Woman model. In turn, the cultural object works to concretize this social reality into material form, to reify the acceptance of this reality, and to provide a point of reference for young girls to be instructed towards an acceptable performative role in the workforce.

But Janie is an impressionable little girl. Will her self-image be permanently marred by the idea of a doll whose feet are tilted permanently in the shape of high heels? Will she grow up believing that her ultimate goal is to grow waist-long, platinum-blond hair? Worse still, will she eventually show up at the beach wearing a glitter-gold bikini and matching pumps? (Williamson 1995: B1).

Here, discourse questions the implications that follow the notion that the cultural object imbues meaning onto the cultural receiver. If Barbie's construction works to organize our social world, Williamson wonders about the cultural values that are internalized within the cultural receiver.

The discourse also connects this direction of cultural production to the idea that cultural products are mass-produced by wealthy companies with the incentive to supply the product with the highest demand without consideration of social values.

In the process of playing, the little girls are educated by the promotion department of the Mattel Corporation, the parent Barbie company. The children adopt a value system rather different from that shaped by the McGuffey Reader: they grow up with Mattel-made expectations. It is important, therefore, to study the educational philosophy of this corporation. Much light comes from an analysis of the costumes manufactured for Barbie and her vinyl-plastic companions, and from studying the articles and short stories in the Mattel Barbie Magazine -- which the company distributes to the 600,000 members of the Official National Barbie Fan Club. (Bess 1965: 26).

In response to discourses that proclaim the company's method of social indoctrination, Mattel suggests that they market objects that are familiar in everyday life. In this way, Mattel faces the criticism that their object is creating new meaning in social life, but the company intends to create an object that performs the broader realities and provides social coherence.

Today's toys are providing the American child with a mirror to society, whether through a burp gun or walking doll, a construction set or model racing car. Faced with charges that they are building profits by teaching children to glorify brutality, sex, and wealth, the toymakers contend that they are merely trying to keep up with the volatile nature of children. (Rakstis 1967: 27).

This volatile nature of society is paralleled to the ongoing construction of the Barbie Doll. Here, her endless possibilities are not discursively understood as a way to create new meanings, but rather, they work to align the representation of the doll and the pre-existing meanings in social life. We see the dynamic movement between cultural object and cultural receiver; as the receiver looks to the object as a "mirror" to society, she is provided with instruction about the acceptable roles available to her.

I also find that the cultural creator is not only impelled by economic incentives but also by social discourses. This dynamic process that comprises multiple social actors is visible throughout the reproduction of Barbie's social coherence. As Mattel is motivated to supply the demand, it profits from those that understand the receiver to instruct the doll in fantastical ways that utilize her extensive range of accessories. As Mattel is also impelled to respond to critical

discourse, it works to appease those that understand the object to instruct with its image of coherent femininity within social reality. To argue that one of these key players holds a stronger impact over the reorganization of femininity is outside the scope of this research. Nevertheless, my findings suggest that the feminist movement has produced the discourse that actively participates in the deliberation over the changes occurring over the course of Barbie's lifetime, and in doing so, works to revitalize Barbie to more precisely represent the fluctuating status of femininity in our society. I argue that as the feminist movement imposes its ongoing debates onto the Barbie doll as a vehicle for feminine deliberation, feminist critics are situated in the cultural diamond as socializing agents in the active reconstruction of the Barbie Doll.

### *Feminists as Socializing Agents*

Feminists are one key group that have been actively engaged in the cultural, political, social, and economic processes that work towards achieving Barbie's social coherence and status as a cultural icon. By arguing that emerging feminist movement stirred controversy around the acceptable representation of Barbie, and continued to engage in the ongoing debate surrounding her impact on young girls, the cultural object remains a tool for feminists, amongst other groups of interest, to express their conception of acceptable femininity. In the production of contentious discourse surrounding her representation, the feminist movement--assuming that the organization of social life is realized from cultural depictions--externalizes its ideals for the feminine self.

While feminists have been active participants throughout Barbie's life, the discourse reveals several key moments in which feminist discourse surrounding her representation was pivotal to gravitate Barbie's representation towards new directive performances. First, the discourse reveals that the National Organization of Women first raised their concerns about the

influence of culture on a public platform when handed out leaflets in front of the Toy Fair of 1972. One 2003 article from the *Guardian* reflects upon feminist activism towards the doll and explains “...Feminists went berserk and accused the manufacturers at the 1972 Toy Fair in New York of perpetuating sexual stereotypes and encouraging girls ‘to see themselves as mannequins, sex objects or housekeepers.’” (Williams 2003: 2.16). This public appearance worked to incite the consequent discourse surrounding her representation and particularly the discourse that presented feminist critiques--many of which, as apparent from above, denigrate their activism. Jumpstarted by the Toy Fair protest, the feminist movement then becomes discursively linked with certain debates surrounding the Barbie doll.

Following the criticism put forth by feminists concerned about the influence of toys, the discourse reveals that the movement sparked a more pointed critique surrounding Barbie's performance in the public sphere and her representation in the workforce. Discourse notes that this second moment of cultural reconsideration prompted Mattel to construct a wide variety of occupations. Under pressure from feminists, Barbie evolved from fashion model to career woman, including doctor, astronaut, police officer, paramedic, athlete, veterinarian and teacher. (Woo 2002). Indeed, the discourse expresses that Mattel is sensitive to such criticism, although it is unclear whether they are more motivated by economic or social incentives. Nevertheless, as Mattel attempts to mitigate concerns about her representation prompted by the feminist movement, contenders respond in various ways under different assumptions of the influence of culture.

Marlene Mura, publisher of *Barbie Bazaar*, a magazine for collectors, finds Barbie's career achievements inspirational. "Barbie tells girls they can be whatever they want to be," says Mura. "She encourages us to think of high profile careers." Motz, the Bowling Green State University popular culture professor, is skeptical. She questions Barbie's commitment to her careers. Take "Day to Night Barbie." She goes off to work in a hot

pink suit and a dainty straw hat and carries a matching pink briefcase. At night, she sheds her suit for a glittering pink gown. "It's an interesting mixed message," says Motz. "Sure, Barbie's got a career, but she doesn't take it very seriously." Barbie may care more about her clothes than her job, Dickey agrees. But mostly she thinks that Barbie is just a fun toy. "She's a symbol of materialism, but she's not a shaper of values," she says. "After all, millions of us have played with Barbie, and we're not all airheads." (Gellene 1989).

Mura and Motz comment on the way that Mattel responded to feminist critiques about Barbie's professional representation, but they express divergent interpretations about the meaning of culture. According to Mura, Mattel's responses are not only meaningful and impactful but positive because the cultural object works to organize social life; by representing Barbie to access and perform roles in more careers, young girls may respond in her image with similar performances of femininity. On the other hand, Motz is critical about meaning of culture; she is not "a shaper of values." Motz is skeptical about the particular messages that are imbued in the doll's representation, but nevertheless, she would contend that the message ultimately does not matter because the object does not instruct the entirety of social life and its performance is just one of many found in other cultural forms.

The historical landscape of Barbie's representation, painted by those inciting others to rethink what kind of world she may create, also presents certain feminist groups to raise issues with specific models. One of the most notable controversies occurred in 1992 when the American Association of University Women raised concerns over the new "Teen Talk" Barbie. One of the 270 sayings that Barbie was programmed to repeat was "Math class is tough!" This moment reveals that Mattel responded to assuage its contentious followers. The company "caved in" to the AAUW not only to change the talking computer chip, but also to offer the AAUW an advisory role in planning future models of the world's best-selling doll. Interestingly, a 1995 model introduced Teacher Barbie, putting the doll on the other side of the black board. Despite

this seemingly happy ending for the feminist group, the discourse surrounding the controversy begins to mark these emerging critiques to follow broader contention over “political correctness”:

The episode marks a new plateau for political correctness, bringing it from the shadows of small interest groups to the toy shelves of little girls everywhere. "Mattel's decision says if political correctness had previously been considered marginalized, it's no longer in the margins. It's in the mainstream," according to columnist M. G. Lord, who is writing a book on Barbie. "Barbie never leads; she always follows. If Barbie does something, that means people in America are comfortable with it." The decision also represents a victory for a school of thought that views toys as serious and powerful tools in shaping sensitive young psyches, competing with parents and teachers in teaching self-image and values. In other words, says Santa Monica psychotherapist Sandy Plone, "Toys are not playthings for children." According to this philosophy, "negative" messages in toys can lead to serious mental and physical problems. "It's almost a form of brainwashing," said Cathy Meredig, president of High Self-Esteem Toys, a company in Woodbury, Minn., that has designed a "realistically proportioned" fashion doll, Happy To Be Me, to compete with Barbie's "tyranny of thinness." (Smith 1992).

Here, the notion that “Barbie always follows” expresses the process in which various social groups incite concerns surrounding a particular performance in an effort to reshape and to produce new reiterations of femininity. The doll’s performance of gender is noted to embody “something ... that America is comfortable with.” Indeed, Butler concurs that femininity—gender, in general—is real only to the extent that it is performed, and therefore, her performance is just one deemed “real” or acceptable in the broader social context. At the same time, Lord’s assumption of society’s active participation in cultural construction is placed against another view of culture’s autonomy in the responses of Sandy Prone and Cathy Meredig. These women imagine that culture is instructive -- the negative message may lead to serious problems -- and they contend that Barbie’s performance of gender is so impactful that it is “brainwashing.” This discourse is typical of that found around the controversies incited by the feminist movement. Dependent upon which model of culture that a columnist follows, the changes made to the doll,

as well as general perspectives about the feminist movement, are either looked upon critically or favorably. Indeed, the discourse surrounding feminist controversies work to reproduce stereotypes about the feminist movement. Feminists are popularly denigrated for the meaning that they attribute to culture and the movement's aim to incite public discourse:

Women columnists like to write about her. Feminists go crazy. This buxom blond with the tiny waist, the amazing legs, the arched feet frozen for all time in the high-heel position, this plastic piece of sexism whose only interest seems to be in possessions, appearance, clothes. How can we permit such a role model for the children of the 1980s? This is what the serious-minded feminists are thinking. (Laskas 1989: 37).

In more recent years Mattel is purported to have introduced certain representations in response to historical feminist discourse. In 2015 Mattel releases new media to “try to be feminist”:

A Barbie advert that attempts to counter various feminist criticisms of the doll over the years was released by Mattel earlier this month - but according to some feminists, there's still a long way to go. The advert, titled 'Imagine the Possibilities', shows a number of young girls doing adult jobs, much to the surprise of the grown-ups who deal with them... Barbie has tried to be feminist before, especially in the much mocked 'computer hacker Barbie' book. But for many, this ad hit the nail on the head, and shows that dolls can young girls aspire to bigger things than going on dates with Ken or shopping for dresses. (Bolton 2015).

As the feminist movement has remained actively engaged in the cultural debates surrounding the impact of the Barbie Doll, and popularly tend to support the notion that the object is at the forefront of socialization, historical critiques spurred by feminist groups have become connected to the discourse surrounding the movement as a whole. Indeed, the discourse makes clear that the doll's “most ardent critics are women.” Despite our traditional subordination under patriarchal institutions, it is women that deliberate which representations of femininity should be made accessible to young girls. As the movement maintains that culture like Barbie works to organize social life, feminists appear to be the socializing agents that construct the boundaries of



appropriate feminine performances.

## Chapter 6: Iconic Potential & the Production of Social Roles

For producers, receivers, and the social world in which they communicate, the cultural object is a meaningful expression of social life: a collection of institutions composed with guiding norms that dictate the structure of society and the roles that individuals inhabit. The nature of the cultural object thereby holds implications about the construction of social roles that are concretized into material form. These roles are then reified through acts of veneration or resisted through acts of resilience. I find that the debates surrounding the impact of the Barbie Doll reveal a landscape of deliberations over the ways that her iconic status holds a force over social actors. Barbie has been the target of social problems since her public debut in 1959; contenders attribute her force to variable amounts of tangible significance over the construction of institutions, social roles, and individual psyches. This discursive process involves the act of boundary negotiation, in which the symbolic classifications of the sacred and the profane that organize the cultural object are contested within their collectively held boundaries of social acceptability. This boundary negotiation is also linked to performativity; as the cultural object continues to hold instructive potential, it serves as a point of reference for consumers to imitate the ideal—that which Barbie conveys in her gender performance. In this struggle I find two discursive forces at play: one discursive potential that is deemed *threatening* and one that is deemed *transformative*. I begin with a discussion pertaining to the former category.

### I. Role Threat

#### *Barbie's Threat to Patriarchal Institutions*

First, in uncovering the ways that contenders suggest that the cultural object has an

influence over the substantiation and endurance of social roles, I identified that the iconic power of the Barbie Doll is considered to be *threatening* to tradition in that it may dismantle what the status quo contends are essential institutions. Discourse of this type expects that as the first adult doll, Barbie will maintain the status quo within various institutions, such as marriage, motherhood, and the workforce. These critics then take issue with those representations that pose alternatives to the tradition. I find that her representation is framed as a type of deviant form of resistance against the traditional roles of wife, mother, and caretaker in a way that presents a new, harmful image to vulnerable girls.

#### *... to Marriage*

Much of the discourse that is disengaged with early images of the Barbie Doll as a fashion model, a daughter, a babysitter, and an older sister, also forgets that Barbie once appeared in a white wedding dress with her beau, Ken. This particular image then lends to the discursive contention surrounding her representation as a single woman. Mothers, for instance, felt that...

“She represented values contrary to what they held; she was not married. She had no parents. The people who created Barbie - all working women in the fashion industry - designed the Barbie dolls to be like them.” (Merli 2005).

Barbie is initially described as “not a kept woman ... while she dates Ken, she’s never married him, ostensibly paying the Barbie Dream Home mortgage herself.” (Cordes 1992). In discussions about her failure to enter a union, the discourse also expresses concern her presentation of sexuality. As a reconstructed version of the Bild Lilli German sex doll for men, it is no surprise that Barbie’s sexuality is regarded as a threat to traditional courtship. The discourse reveals instances where parents felt compelled to shield their daughters from the influence of the doll:

Barbie was “not the kind of woman that nice little girls grew up to be.” ... My sister and I didn’t know the word for it, but we could tell from the reaction of our parents that Barbie was a slut. Nobody ever told me I “had to look like Barbie,” as feminists often claim. Instead, the message came through loud and clear that I was never to show up anywhere looking like Barbie. (Scott 2002: 155).

The words of this 2002 Gender and Consumer Behavior author reflects on her experience of the parental intervention found throughout the discourse. In fact, critics point out that were it not for these interventions, young boys and girls would not only be misguided away from the institution of marriage but would also develop an unhealthy form of sexuality:

“Boys are being seen in the clinic who use Barbie for sexual stimulation, a fact which might trouble the same parents who are scandalized by comic books and pin-up magazines, were it not for the fact that Barbie masquerades as a child’s toy. Both boys and girls are introduced to a precocious, joyless sexuality, to fantasies of seduction and to conspicuous consumption. This reflects and perpetuates a disturbing trend in our culture, which has serious mental-health complications.”

-- Dr. Alan F. Leveton, director of the Pediatrics Mental Health Unit, University of California Medical Center, San Francisco (Rakstis 1967: 44).

Here, a children’s physician points out that the Barbie Doll’s representation of sexuality has real, observable consequences on the normal development of a child’s mental health. This type of harm is argued to preside in other contentious aspects of her representation and will be explored in further discussion about her influence on body image.

While much of this threatening potential revolves around her embodied sexual nature, other contenders are not convinced and instead suggest that Barbie’s status as single reveals a denial of sexuality.

What might at first appear to be a sexually suggestive doll ... is in actuality a model of self-control, using her sexuality to attract men while ensuring that her relationships would remain safely platonic. Far from being a sex goddess, Barbie was the epitome of the unapproachable woman. (Motz 1983: 129).

Here, Motz envisions that Barbie serves as a clear indicator of her representation of femininity. She is “unapproachable”—not the “marriageable” type. Paradoxically, it is her lack of sexuality--her failure to allure men--that threatens her traditional role within the institution of marriage.

*... to Motherhood*

Despite Mattel’s intention to please the requests of young girls that requested Barbie to have a boyfriend, the discourse regards Barbie’s relationship status as an insufficient achievement of the feminine role and therefore a harmful representation to impressionable youth. In a similar manner to its strategy to “meet halfway” by advertising Barbie and Ken as a couple, Mattel introduced Barbie as an older sister and as a baby sitter in 1963. The discourse reveals this to be an effort to convey a particular image of traditional femininity without fully conceding to the responsibilities of motherhood. Ruth Handler explains that Mattel “... dared not give Barbie and Ken a baby of their own. Barbie can baby-sit. What the child does with the baby is up to her.” (Milton 1963: 85).

As I speculated before I entered the discursive field, I found that the act of boundary negotiation produces highly moral and emotional discourse surrounding the impact of the Barbie doll. Since the doll embodies the instructive potential that provides consumers with the “ideal” to imitate in gender performance, critics imbue her meaning with a negative symbolic classification—one that is understood as “profane.” It becomes almost humorous to examine discourse that demonstrates critics deeply worried about Barbie’s failure to mother and the impact that this representation has on the well-being of young girls: “Barbie might make girls less able to achieve the emotional preparation for being a wife and mother that they received from baby dolls” (Winick 1968: 208) ... “[Barbie] may serve to integrate children prematurely

into the adolescent subculture and minimize preparation for later adult performances such as those associated with conjugal, parental, and occupational status or position (Ball 1967: 457).”

Critics begin to imagine that Barbie will influence girls to forgo traditional roles, a possibility that presents a daunting image of a society without the institutions of marriage and family.

Scholars seek to further study the empirical impact of the Barbie Doll on the construction of social roles:

The degree to which her influence has actually affected children in the sixties and seventies needs to be investigated more closely. Of interest also is Barbie's impact upon future families, the families formed by the young girls of the "Barbie generation." Will [girls], like Barbie, resist the responsibility of having children, or, following Barbie's lead even more completely, resist the responsibility of marriage and family altogether? ... Will [they] become ... frustrated cynics if their private Barbie fantasies do not come true? (Cox 1977: 306).

The first study to query the influence of the Barbie Doll was conducted in 1959 by marketing researcher Dr. Ernest Dichter. Later I will discuss similar methods used to investigate and empirically study the influence of the Barbie Doll in more clinical settings.

#### *... to Male Dominated Occupations*

Furthermore, while much of the discourse criticizes her arguably unrealistic aspirations of leisure and consumption, others begin to recognize Barbie's other ambitions and highlight her entrance into the professional workforce. However, her achievements are regarded to be directly connected to her sexual nature. Her access to the male public sphere is framed as a threatening possibility that career women will manipulate their male counterparts, destroy their morality, and to completely dismantle the male-dominated industry. By the mid-1980s, Barbie's careers had

ranged from being represented as a teacher, astronaut, Olympic athlete surgeon, or a veterinarian, and within this context the following criticism is found:

Their [Barbie and Ken's] continuing popularity indicates that many men and women still see sex as an instrument of power in an industrial and consumer context. But whereas the Barbie Doll used to represent the management of the male audience for marriage, she now personifies the career woman manipulating it for business success. (Berg 1986: 209-10).

Discourse that critically examines Barbie's entrance into the professional sphere not only accuse her leadership positions to pose a risk to traditional male dominion, as exemplified in the passage above, but also present antipathy towards the male population as a whole. Critics claim that her female leadership is a direct blow to masculinity:

The Barbie for President campaign ought to win the Oscar equivalent for marketing. It also might be cited for propaganda-mongering. For Barbie has become the worst sort of feminist. She's anti-male ... More troublesome was this question: If you were running for president, whom would you choose as your vice president? Your mom, your teacher, your best friend or Barbie? Dad wasn't even an option. The message: Men – so unnecessary (Parker 2000).

Without a comparable male counterpart, Barbie's marketed status as President is directly threatening to the neat and orderly way that leadership has been understood in America since its founding. This criticism is only one of many that purport Barbie's representation to present an attack on masculinity.

### *... and to the Masculine Gender*

Even before the Barbie Doll began to assume the highest leadership positions in society, Barbie's representation has held a discursive potential to overthrow traditional forms of masculinity since her days in the fashion industry. Her representation of the feminine ideal

prompted a social world to be constructed with the other subjects involved in her performance of gender. It was Ken's appearance in 1961 that moved critics to look critically at the ways Mattel presents their gendered interactions between femininity and masculinity. I did not expect to find such a wealth of discourse that expresses concern about Ken's questionable manhood. Indeed, as critics interpret Barbie's gender performance in relation to that of Ken, whose masculinity is considered passive, they classify their relationship with a negative symbolic meaning. Their relationship is not one that is sought to be imitated, repeated, and idealized. One 1992 article from *The Vancouver Sun* describes their relationship as a representation of "the modern male's worst nightmare":

Ken has become just another accessory in the Barbie dream house. "Barbie is a dominatrix," Botto said. "Ken is a wimp. When I was looking through *Vogue* in the '80s, I thought the models had a Barbie look. This is when S&M entered fashion. "The strange men in the photographs always looked like props, and the women were flaunting their haute couture, semi-bored looks. Like they're going to eat you alive. (Kahn 1992).

Other critics highlight aspects of Ken's representation and particular wardrobes that seemingly fall short to portray a dominant form of masculinity. Ken is framed as "less than" in comparison to the G.I. Joe, another male doll that surprisingly appears across the discourse in various discussions about Barbie's partners. Here, Bess (1965) is deeply worried about the impact that Ken's representation will have on the gendered dynamics of real world relationships:

However, don't let your tot marry them. Ken simply isn't ready to be taken to the altar. Let him have a couple of years in the Army (Mattel has a soldier outfit). He is an inch taller than Barbie, but it takes more than that to make a man. ...And on the honeymoon at Waikiki, he'll be wearing gold Bermuda shorts and green knee socks; it would be odd if this outfit failed to win him some homosexual propositions. It is even harder to imagine his fate if he should decide to wear his "Ken-in-Hawaii" costume, which presents him in a blue-and-white malu, sandals, ukulele and straw hat decked with flowers. (Do you want your little girl to keep dressing him this way? She might think this is what society expects of the man of her dreams. Maybe someday she will want to dress her husband this way) (Bess 1965: 26).



Bess is one of many critics that finds Ken's representation to inaccurately portray the masculine ideal. This shortcoming holds dire implications for those that envision Barbie's femininity to dominate her male partner and to shift the gender hierarchy in the real world. Where Ken continues to pose a threat to representations of acceptable masculinity, it is also implied that Barbie also poses a threat to representations of femininity. However, whereas the former purports that Barbie's gendered performance overpowers that of Ken, the latter claims that her representation disempowers her ability to accurately portray the real-world aspirations and capabilities of the female population.

### *Barbie's Threat to Feminine Representations*

Anti-Barbie claims targeting her poor coherence into American social institutions shifted in focus with the emerging feminist movement. With rising concerns over media portrayals and stereotypical images of women, the iconic power of the Barbie Doll is also understood to pose a threat to broader representations of femininity. The discourse signals such threatening potential surrounding those arguably inaccurate images of femininity that uphold traditional stereotypes and reinforce unrealistic ideals. These feminist critiques range from pointing toward the characteristics expressed on the surface, such as her personality and body shape, to the roles and responsibilities she conveys through her activities and occupations. The discourse advances what could otherwise be individual, Barbie-specific qualities to argue that they wrongfully represent the feminine status as a whole. In doing so, the discourse upholds her iconic power but in the way that she breaks down the respectful image of the feminine ideal.

Whereas earlier concerns were raised about her failure to follow tradition, Barbie comes under attack for reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. The doll's personality is torn apart;

she is described as "empty-headed," with "crushingly limited life choices" that emphasized "passivity" (Maguire 1987: 20). Furthermore, her ever-expanding wardrobe lends critics to criticize her personality as a "fashion-victim personality" (Jackson 1991: 35) as well as the skillset attached to these consumption activities. As an acclaimed spokeswoman for the latest fashion trends, Barbie taught girls...

“...the skills by which their future success will be measured: purchase of the proper high-status goods, popularity with their peers, creation of the correct personal appearance, and the visible achievement of 'fun' through appropriate leisure activities.” (Motz 1983: 122).

Criticism implicitly connects Mattel’s work of annually re-vamping the doll to the broader connotations underlying Barbie’s physical appearance. These quick wardrobe changes and her upkeep with the latest trends lead critics to highlight that she is far too critical about her looks. Barbie’s aspirations are limited to achieving a particular image that threatens portrayals of femininity. In fact, one West Virginia state lawmaker proposed that the sale of Barbie be illegal in his state, as she "encourages young girls to focus on looks instead of intellect." (Williams 2009: A4).

In this respect, the discourse communicates an adamant stance against what are perceived as the negative effects of the doll – indicating that the Barbie doll serves as a teaching tool for social roles. Where the implications of these lessons diverge, however, is found in disagreements pertaining to which information Barbie “truly” disseminates about the feminine identity.

Mothers, for example, are critical of how Barbie conceals the valuable facets of femininity. The discourse explores the debates raised by mothers convinced of Barbie’s threatening potential:

Many mothers see Barbie as a negative influence; not wanting to teach their daughters that they have to be blonde and beautiful to get a boyfriend or a career, some women do

not allow Barbie's into their homes ... Barbie has always been an easy scapegoat for feminists. (Riddick 2001).

This passage supports that mothers view Barbie as a teaching tool but one that encourages “wrong” measures of femaleness. This concern in fact was first found during Mattel’s initial consumer testing, when mothers “absolutely hated her ... in Mom’s eyes, Barbie was too sexy, too grown-up, too flamboyant.” Mothers wanted dolls that were either babies or little girls, not adults. (Lord 1994: 38-40). The concern that Barbie promotes ill-suited values to impressionable youth is also implied here to be central to the anti-Barbie sentiments raised in the feminist movement. With her overt nature being framed as sexual, shallow, and materialistic ... she was “the epitome of everything feminists of the time were fighting against: a wordless woman whose sole value was in her appearance.” (LaPlante-Dube 2015). By deliberating what an iconic doll should express to young girls, the most proper performance of gender is negotiated by various stakeholders. As arguments develop around how the cultural object’s meaning should imitate an ideal form, critics construct the boundaries around the performances that should be reiterated and the others that should be reconsidered.

Beyond the “wrong measures” of femininity found in her appearance, Barbie is also judged to lack an appropriate measure of humanity, generosity, and innocent charm. These characteristics are contrary to those found in the depictions of her as a traditional, wholesome girl that is socially integrated in the middle-class suburbia.

The irony for the original Barbie Generation is that Barbie, the biggest sex object, anti-feminist ever to strut down Madison Avenue, continues to thrive. She's the worst kind of hypocrite: a shallow, insipid, please everybody manipulator desperate for love and attention. In other words, the perfect leader for our times. (Parker 2000: B11 Parker)

Here, Parker is not surprised that what she observes to be a direct threat to feminist ideals has risen in leadership status. Rather, she attributes this rise to anti-feminism, and these concerns also stake their claim in the discourse over who Barbie is and what she means for admiring girls. Individuals outside of the feminist movement also contend that Barbie is a poor representation of morality. Ruth Handler's own son, for example, has expressed that the Barbie doll "has the wrong values" and "should care about poverty and suffering in the world." (Green 1989: 189). I stress that the argument surrounding Barbie as a do-gooder is quite vague but nevertheless prevalent. The discourse neglects to raise particular representations in support of this argument but instead constructs a meta-narrative that Barbie *desires* to be worshipped and adorned (but whose pleasures are undeserving of this praise). I suggest that this notion supports the totemic principle that posits the object to symbolize the group itself and to maintaining the lines of cultural purity. The contention surrounding Barbie's morality here works to deliberate whether she is worthy to act as a totem. In this respect the aforementioned discourse recognizes Barbie as an object that is put forth with these intentions but ultimately falls short in achieving alignment with the cultural values that are worthy of being reinforced and "worshipped" through child play.

Moreover, other issues continue to hold more substantial scholarly weight against her iconic aura, particularly those that are empirically studied to influence the mental and physical development of young girls. Of the utmost concern to feminists and others that seek a more transformative model of femininity is the criticism that Barbie disempowers in the way that she sets unattainable standards, particularly for beauty and body image (Cunningham 1993; Urla and Swedlund 1995). The most frequently cited aspect of her representation is her physique. Scholarly discourse locates these concerns within broader knowledges of culture and health. Scholarship in cultural studies, for example, claims that the toy represents the paradigm of adult

female beauty to which young girls learn to aspire (Freedman 1986; Turkel 1998). Following the explosion of cultural scholarship in the late 1970s, empirical research in developmental psychology has proliferated to explore the empirical and observable ways that Barbie's physique affects body image (Kuther 2004). After this brief introduction to the discursive field surrounding Barbie's unrealistic ideals, I identify a third salient area of Barbie's threatening potential that both discursively and according to scholarship, empirically, holds dire implications for the construction of the feminine self.

### *Barbie's Threat to 'Normal' Development*

I would be remiss to forgo discussion of the proliferating discourse not only claiming but concluding that the Barbie Doll has observable, corporeal repercussions for the development of the female identity. While critics are found in newspapers and magazines to quickly cite Barbie's measurements, the deliberations over Barbie's cultural autonomy has expanded to clinical settings. Thus, scholarship surrounding the Barbie Doll is either cultural or psychological in focus. The first known investigation is conducted by Brownell and Napolitano (1995), who show that to have the physical measurements of Barbie, an average U.S. adult woman would have to be 2 feet taller, have a neck 3 inches longer, have a chest 4 inches larger, and be 6 inches smaller in the waist. Scholarly discourse shifts to explore how this unattainable body may have real world impact.

For example, Dittmar et al. (2006) found that English girls (aged 5–8 years) reported feeling less satisfied with their own bodies after reading a story illustrated by pictures of Barbie compared to another group that read the same story without the pictures. Additionally, scholars have begun to conduct more clinical studies to examine the observable ways that the Barbie Doll

affects the mental and physical health of young girls. Sherman & Zurbriggen (2014) expand experimental design by using a naturalistic play setting, rather than a picture book, to operationalize the independent variable of Barbie exposure. Also, Anschutz & Engels (2010) found that girls ate less food when they played with the thin dolls than when they played with the average sized doll; “Perhaps the girls were inspired by the Barbie to achieve a slim body and therefore ate less.” (2010: 628). I suggest that this scholarship is a significant contribution to the discourse surrounding the meaning and impact of cultural objects. It is in the clinical findings of these studies that scholars seek to understand the place of culture in our lives. From an academic perspective within the sociology of knowledge, the stakes of defining and understanding Barbie as a legitimate scientific statement have deep effects on her meaning as a tool for socialization that may provide either positive or negative influence—but most generally, traceable effects that may be empirically investigated using cultural receivers.

Furthermore, the sole piece of data neither strictly popular nor scholarly is located on a website, Rehabs.com. One organization has assumed the mission to expose the harmful message that underlies Barbie’s measurements and created this informational website about eating disorders. Its web page is titled “Dying to Be Barbie,” and displays a comprehensive chart to compare the average woman’s measurements with those of Barbie. The site directly connects this epidemic to the Barbie Doll:

The anxieties they experience are the product of a society and media culture that prizes a thin image for women above anything else, and devalues any woman who strays outside the false "norm" of a skinny body. In pursuit of that unattainable goal, they will literally starve themselves to death. They are dying to be like Barbie. (Recovery Managers 2013).

Indeed, as feminist critics contextualize these findings back to the broader culture that disseminates comparable images of thinness, discourse continues to purport that the harm is not simply escalated by but provoked by the iconic power of the Barbie Doll:

Rather, I believe it is our society's glorification of thinness and the corollary prejudice against overweight people that encourages this obsession. Fashion models, movie stars, and a host of other mediated images link thinness with social desirability and achievement. And I believe it begins with Barbie dolls. (Wanless 2010: 127).

In agreement with Barbie as the cultural compass that disciplines the female body, discourse reconnects this point of contention to argue against her unrealistic ideals. Turke examines that if she were real, she'd be so slender that she wouldn't be able to menstruate; the narrow hips and concave stomach would not have the necessary 17%-22% body fat. Furthermore, it was soon after Barbie appeared that department-store mannequins were introduced that looked as though they had only 10% body fat. Overeaters Anonymous was founded in 1960, soon after Barbie's debut and Weight Watchers was introduced in 1962. (Turke 1998: 165). Interestingly, individuals do not point to the Barbie Doll to support her presence within personal narratives of eating disorders but instead the discourse reveals reliance on the broad statistics surrounding the proliferation of these disorders in Western society.

I conclude that scholarly and popular discourse work together to create a conversation about the meaning and impact of the Barbie doll. Critical analyses do not simply deliberate that the cultural object is imbued with a significant meaning that becomes displaced onto the bodies of those exposed to her. These works of scholarship empirically prove that the Barbie doll's representation is an influential tool to construct bodily acts of discipline on the basis of gender. These last points expand the finding of Barbie's discursive potential to threaten traditional social

roles, revealing her empirical capabilities to construct a meaningful ideal that then works to discipline the feminine self.



## II. Role Transformation

Contrary to her discursive potential to dismantle traditional patriarchal institutions, to threaten the endurance of feminine roles of motherhood, housewife, and caretaker, and to pose a disturbing image of the ideal female, other discourses diverge to frame the Barbie doll not to disempower institutional norms but to empower individuals to overcome these social structures. The debates surrounding the impact of the Barbie Doll reveal a landscape of deliberations over the ways that her iconic status holds a force over social actors. Digging deeper, the discourse is replete with agreement over the powerful capabilities of Barbie's iconic force. Where threads in the discourse diverge is in the deliberations over which representations of Barbie ought to be maintained and/or changed within institutional settings, which ought to be reinforced onto the female identity, as well as which social actor holds the authority to make these distinctions: the cultural object herself or the individual that is exposed to the iconic force. I argue that Barbie's iconic status also offers a discursive potential that is *transformative* and allows individuals to make those distinctions over Barbie's cultural resonance, because as a doll or cultural object she is forever embedded in the social world in which she is produced, disseminated, and played with. I now explore the ways that discourse reveals her attributions of her iconic force to motivate free-thinking and individual empowerment to navigate and to loosen the constrained boundaries of acceptable femininity.

First, I found many expressions contending that Barbie's original marketing was an effort to promote her fantastical abilities devoid from institutional norms. These claims identify that the doll's "gender trouble" is located outside of doll's instructive potential and any socially-agreed upon meanings but instead is accredited to her cultural receivers. The young girls that manipulate

her performance of femininity are suggested to have the power to navigate the pressures of the social world and to produce a freely chosen iteration of femininity onto the malleable doll.

Barbie in this respect continues to thrive as a teaching tool--not only to portray the range of appropriate feminine representations--but to inspire and to work out one's future self. Barbie's mission to do so has continued to thrive throughout the decades:

Barbie is a truly revolutionary doll, one that inspired, rather than oppressed, young girls' imaginations; ... the one toy that, since the mid-sixties, has epitomized for little girls the term 'having it all.' (Bracuk 1991: 37-38).

Discourse that focuses on her transformative value tends to be structured around personal narratives that reveal the very individual and otherwise subversive ways that youth utilize the Barbie doll as they please. For example, Amy Leftkov responds to feminist criticism in the *New York Times* and to argue the play value of the Barbie Doll:

To be sure, clothes were in abundance, but so was adventure. Our Barbies traveled wherever our imaginations took them. They went into backyard trees to explore jungles; our Barbies led expeditions to India to save people from starvation. Ms. Quindlen says that Barbie "gives little girls the message that the only thing that's important is being tall and thin and having a big chest." Barbie gave us no messages; it was we who gave Barbie meaning. (Leftkov 1994).

Leftkov highlights the central tenet of this discursive transformation: it is through the child and through the individual's form of play that the meaning of the cultural object is constructed. By playing with a doll that is offered a seemingly never-ending collection of material goods, children are able to create new meanings in the process of undressing, redressing, and re-thinking how they would like to construct her representation. One type of play value connected to this extensive range of items found in the Barbie Collection is seen in the joy of collecting and

hunting for the pieces as a type of hobby. One 1980 *Hobbies Magazine* article is based around one young girl's experience:

Collecting Barbies has given much enjoyment to Vicky and her family, ever since her grandmother, Eliese Pareski, bought Vicky her first Barbie dolls when she was only 3 years old. They were shopping when Vicky spotted a display case filled with Barbies dressed in their various outfits. Even today these dolls are very special to her. One day Vicky happened to notice that she had never seen some outfits pictured in the booklets that were packaged with dolls and the clothes. They started to look for these outfits and then soon discovered other dolls too. The search was on! Even Vicky's dad became a Barbie doll spotter. He found himself going to flea markets and stopping at garage sales to see if he could find some of the older costumes and dolls (Schulthesis and Miller 1980: 40).

Furthermore, by offering a never-ending collection of materials, Barbie fanatics point out that the many options lend to her fantastical abilities and allow children to imaginatively explore new places that they have never been. Barbie is utilized to live out the curiosities and desires of the young girl herself:

One day, on a whim, Barbie flew off to Paris in her private shoe box jet with Ken. They danced under the stars after a dinner of, ooh lala, snails and french fries and napoleons. Even so, she broke up with Ken for dozens of different reasons, then reconciled with him for the sake of passion--the sort that any doll or human is hardpressed to resist (Berg 1999: 144).

And, as girls are able to attribute the Barbie Doll with their own personal meanings, they learn how to improvise, solve problems, and even display compassion. Leftkov continues to elaborate this point:

Among other things, Barbie taught compassion to my friends and me. When our dolls' bendable knee joints gave out, they were not thrown away but treated as physically challenged Barbies, whereupon we made make-shift wheelchairs for them. When Ken's arm was chewed off by the dog, we tried to convince our Barbies they should see beyond his disability. (Leftkov 1994).

By revealing how the cultural object allows room for interpretation, critics rebut the claim that the doll inherently indoctrinates youth with particular messages. It is within this room for

interpretation that children may construct imaginative narratives that build their emotional capacities and allow them to work through with real-world problems. In a similar manner, the discourse presents the ways that organizations use the Barbie Doll as a developmental tool for dealing with new ways of life:

Children's Hospital of Los Angeles uses Barbie in therapy with children who must undergo amputations. After Barbie's arm or leg is removed, she is fitted with prosthesis and given as a gift to the sick child. "It helps the children understand what will happen to them," says Ellen Zaman, a social worker who is director of patient family services at the hospital. (Gellene 1989).

Despite the widespread notion that Barbie is marketed with a particular narrative--that she lives a lifestyle of leisure and consumption, for example--Barbie reveals a potential to transform the conventional status that others impose upon her. Contrary to the idea that she reinforces the privilege of those "seemingly" similar to her, Barbie players reflect on the ways that the doll had worked to promote the acceptance of difference. For example, women think back to the ways that they constructed the social pairings in unconventional ways:

In a doll domain with 96 eligible females and Ken, unusual pairings were common. Sometimes Skipper and Scooter slept in the guest room shoe box with Casey. One night I found the Malibu Barbie trio in my desk drawer on top of cousin Francie. It was O.K. by me -- as long as they followed one rule: Everyone shares clothes. And since afternoon teas and disco dances were hard to attend if you had a child to look after, each Little Kiddle was assigned nine mothers, who rotated child care responsibilities. (Shapiro 1994: 84).

Furthermore, the discourse highlights the ways that Mattel's marketing has also worked to promote the acceptance of alternative lifestyles overtime. These new models work to shift the cultural norms attached to Barbie's traditional upper-class status. In 1999 parents were outraged over the new Butterfly Art Barbie, one of the more controversial models that displayed a permanent tattoo, some responses shone a light on the never-before-seen representation:

Just as a traditional Barbie might send a message of unearthly proportional perfection and conformity, a Barbie with a tattoo lets kids know it's OK to be different, said Lee Brook, a tattoo artist at Lou's National Tattoos in Lakeland, Fla. (Ledger 1999: A4).

Other new models of diversity have led more widespread positive reception. In 2016 Mattel introduced the line to several new body types, including petite, curvy, and tall Barbie dolls in an effort to “better reflect the owner’s world.” (Spektor 2016). These models are seen as a direct acknowledgement of the ongoing contention surrounding her physique as unrealistic and harmful to impressionable youth, and in turn, critics are quite pleased by the response.

The changes made to Barbie’s body overtime shine a light on the transformative potential found within her corporeal form. Nevertheless, I find just as significant as these physical alterations are the new ways that the discourse re-conceptualizes and transforms the Barbie Doll within the broader feminist movement. Despite general assumptions that Barbie is “everything deemed anti-feminist,” Barbie’s transformative potential is also recognized within feminist circles. Some feminists view her as a symbol of female emancipation “because she works and does not have to depend on men for her wealth and possessions” (Riddick 2002). Instead of thinking of Barbie’s life to be constrained by the vision of the Mattel company, the discourse re-frames the doll to overpower the constraints presented by broader societal norms that structures the feminine role. For example, the discourse shifts to present Barbie as a representation of the never-before-seen female roles:

“‘The public has come to think of Barbie as their dream girl,’ says Lynda Finch of Mattel Toys. ‘Barbie has a unique ability to inspire confidence, glamour and a sense of adventure in all who love her. Barbie has been a role model to women as an Astronaut both in 1986 and in 1965, nearly twenty years before Sally Ride! As a doctor in 1988 and a veterinarian in 1985, Barbie doll has opened new dreams for girls that were not as accessible in 1959.’” (Forrest 1989: 24-25).

It is at the divergence between those that proclaim Barbie's empowerment--particularly through her significant appearance in new professional roles--and those that maintain Barbie's oppression--through her arguably destructive physique and her discursively understood representations of traditional roles—that we observe how Barbie fits into the cultural debates over what is proper femininity. Debates connect this contention over Barbie's representation to the broader conflicts that are tied to deliberating the female role. For example, Barbie is described as “having to apologize” for being the woman that she wants to be:

Now Barbie's makers have decided to fight back and turn the conversation about her absurd proportions around. Last month, they launched a new campaign called #Unapologetic to push back at some of the haters. “In essence, Barbie is always asked to apologize for what she looks like,” Mattel spokeswoman Michelle Chidoni tells me. “And the message there is to be unapologetic.” The new ads that include a Times Square billboard and lots of social media (“Be YOU. Be Bold. Be #Unapologetic”) are clearly intended to beat body-image critics at their own game. (Alter 2014).

And, one *Time* article highlights how Mattel recognizes this connection between the Barbie discourse and broader debates over femininity. The widespread contention over Barbie's physique is one example of how discursive actors utilize her as a platform to explore how a female ought to present herself.

In our obsession with Barbie's size, we're overlooking what she represents to the children who play with her -- endless possibility. Her role is to be a creative vessel for young girls to explore their own, personal ambitions. We shouldn't impede their imaginations with our focus on what that vessel should look like and what her storyline should be. (Guido 2014 Guido).

This passage problematizes the nature of debates over female appearance. Here, expressions of being “obsessed” with Barbie's size reinforce the notion that it is acceptable for non-female actors to maintain authority over the female body. In turn, the original intention of the Barbie

Doll is arguably lost and her discursive potential to transform broader notions of femininity and to inspire imagination continue to be suppressed.

Furthermore, I find that contentious discourse surrounding Barbie's representation also construes a discursive landscape for articulating appropriate female work. By framing the Barbie Doll as a tool for female empowerment, the following passage reveals that Barbie is imbued with a discursive potential to transform the gender makeup of the workforce. In doing so, this discursive actor articulates these positions are deserving of female representation:

Yes, Barbie is aiming to be the poster doll for female empowerment. And that's not as strange as it sounds. Barbie has worked every second of every day since she was invented in 1959, and she's broken more glass ceilings than Sheryl Sandberg. Sure, she started off as a teen fashion model, but quickly worked her way up to fashion editor, then decided "what the hell" and went back to get her doctorate in astrophysics so that she could be an astronaut by 1965. In the 1970s she performed surgeries and won the 1975 Olympics (where she dominated every event, since no other athletes competed that year). And in the '90s she ran for President, performed with the Rockettes and played for Dallas in the WNBA. Like a lot of successful women, she finds that no matter how much she achieves people won't stop talking about her looks. (Alter 2014).

Other supporters continue to portray Barbie in all of her glory. By focusing on what she owns and what she has been, her collection presents an extensive palette of options that expose young girls to a variety of acceptable feminine roles and representations.

She does, after all, hold jobs, drive cars, garden, take vacations, own homes, and perform many other chores adults need to accomplish. And her jobs aren't only traditional female ones such as being a nurse or a stewardess. Now a young girl may go "looking for dinosaurs with Paleontologist Barbie." In her perky khaki shorts with matching hat and her coordinating pink scarf and pink canteen. Barbie isn't exactly as rough-and-tumble as Indiana Jones, but at least her work is less stereotypical than teaching first-graders. The same Career Collection also includes Pilot Barbie and Dentist Barbie. If these careers seem too tame, NASCAR Barbie (introduced in 1998) has a career as a racecar driver. Barbie allows young girls to explore a number of careers and, more important, suggests that such careers are perfectly acceptable for girls and women (Inness 1999: 178-179).

And her creator agrees. In her 1994 autobiography, Ruth Handler writes, "My whole philosophy of Barbie was that through the doll, the little girl could be anything she wanted to be. Barbie

always represented the fact that a woman has choices.”(1994: 44). In this vein, Ruth Handler may be considered a “Gender Troubler” herself. She created a tool for young girls to envision the process of feminine development that had previously lacked a mechanism for self-realization, and most notably, this creation occurred during an era when this imagination was deemed taboo and private—much outside of collective doll play.

Barbie discourse exposes the ways that a wide range of social actors construct their own interpretations of femininity. She is framed as a victim not as we previously saw in terms of her constrained choices, but in the way that her audience articulates her representation and often remains ignorant to the diversity of ways that she presents the female identity.

Who is there to say women cannot be what they want to be and get praised for it? Barbie is kicking down barriers one at a time. We should all follow suit and continue kicking down barriers of our own. From the runway to the toy aisle and even corporate America, women are being empowered in ways we have never experienced before. Barbie has been judged for her size, color and job her entire life just like every woman in history. Maybe once we stop breaking apart a doll, we can do the same for ourselves (Gage 2016).

This passage foremost recognizes that the cultural object is at the forefront of portraying what is deemed as acceptable femininity; if Barbie is breaking these barriers, “who is to say” that women cannot do the same? The previous passages reveal her many abilities that constitute her status as a role model, and yet she continues to receive an unjust amount of criticism. Ultimately, the implications for utilizing the doll as a discursive exercise extend to real-world occurrences of passing judgment on the decisions that females make in navigating various social institutions. Thus, the discourse implies that acceptable femininity may be continued to be deliberated by outside actors, and the livelihoods of females remain the subject of debate by those that occupy otherwise irrelevant positions in society.



Here, I have demonstrated that Barbie's potential for transformation was initially prompted by her material goods that traditionally receive negative backlash for promoting consumption. The Barbie collection offers an extensive range of identities that act as a cultural palette for her playmates to work out their everyday realities, to deal with tough situations, and to explore themes, places, and adventures that they otherwise cannot. Individuals are empowered with a wide range of representations which may resonate on a personal level, and their personal narratives shine a light on the intimate ways that young girls utilize this cultural palette. Women and girls over the past six decades continue to conceive of Barbie as a "forever friend" (Stark 1993; Cheever 2002; Bicknese 2016) and she empowers their own expression of feminine roles. She is deeply connected to the feminine lives of those that play with her, mostly because throughout time she has been understood as a tangible indicator of the very real struggles tied to proclaiming the female identity in the changing American society. The discourse surrounding her representation presents a platform for the cultural conflicts over femininity to ensue, and she is a cultural object that embodies the widespread contention over what is deliberated as acceptable feminine representation.

## Discussion

In this thesis I investigated the Barbie doll as a cultural icon, and I studied the historical developments in the discourse surrounding the meaning and impact of her representation. Since 1959, the ways she has changed in response to cultural criticism reveals the process through which icons embody and transform with social meaning. After examining the collective process of both imbuing and contesting the meanings surrounding the doll, I uncover how culture is directly related to the structure and transformation of the feminine role.

My historical analysis produced three salient findings. First, in chapter four I discover how the cultural product gains iconic status. The Barbie Doll is one cultural object that is collectively produced and contested by the many actors of Griswold's cultural diamond, comprised of the object, the cultural creator, and the cultural receiver, all anchored in the social world (1978). As she entered the social world as a cultural product in 1959, she conveyed a particular image representative of the ideal female at the time. She embodied the post-war ideals of social integration and identified as a traditional girl in white, middle-class American society. I use the cultural diamond as an analytical device to uncover the process through which she was gravitated to identity as a modern woman that "does-it-all" and "has it all." In the discontinuity of these two frames, Barbie reveals that our culture is anchored against the discourse that reproduces coherent iterations of our broader social world. As the cultural object is reworked to resonate with and imitate the social ideal—"to stay in vogue"—its instructive potential allows the doll to gain its iconic status. The cultural object is held accountable for her social meanings and her performance of femininity. Barbie becomes a person, a celebrity even, who is ultimately built up by her social world to paradoxically maintain autonomy from these discursive processes at large.

Second, in chapter five I review how that iconic status is negotiated through competing social forces. The Barbie doll is negotiated within the collectively held boundaries of feminine meaning. As the cultural object undergoes her feminine performance, the act of boundary negotiation takes place with each new reiteration of femininity surveyed and contested as an appropriate form for individuals to imitate in their own performances of femininity. This process occurs alongside a broader debate over the meaning and impact of cultural objects. First, those that understand the direction of culture to flow from consumer to object identify the Barbie doll as a “vehicle to let little girls dream,” which delimits the impact that culture has over social organization. Second, those that understand the direction of culture to flow from object to consumer are concerned with the social meanings behind her representation because they serve as education messages to imitate and idealize. I find that feminists fall into this camp, and throughout Barbie’s lifetime, they are located in the cultural diamond to gravitate Barbie’s performance of gender in an effort to create new reiterations of femininity – and in doing so, they actively work towards achieving her iconic status. Ultimately, it is the tension between the competing, directional forces of cultural production that actively rejuvenates her iconic status and continues to produce contentious discourse surrounding her representation.

Third, in chapter six I identify the social implications for the construction of the feminine role as connected to the cultural icon. As the cultural object undergoes the discursive forces behind boundary negotiation, the doll is then symbolically classified as a social resource for young girls to imitate—or, to resist—in concurrent performances of femininity. The divergent interpretations stem from various worldviews held in the discourse. The first classification aligns with Douglas’s notion of the sacred, and Barbie is offered a transformative discursive potential to create new, positive iterations of femininity. The second aligns with Douglas’s notion of the

profane, and Barbie is offered a threatening discursive potential that also creates new iterations of femininity but ones that are negative and pose risk to the decline of traditional roles. Indeed, both classifications account for Barbie's nature as a continually reworked object and her ability to reveal evidence about social life as a whole. I support Gallo-Cruz's contributing to framing studies that the boundaries of classification originate among distinct, interpretive worldviews (2012: 23). The opposing views over her implications fail to agree on the ideal feminine iteration. While those that offer Barbie a threatening potential locate the ideal feminine role within traditional, patriarchal institutions—one defined as wife, mother, and caretaker—those that offer Barbie a transformative potential approves the feminine ideal to surpass these boundaries and to exist in other social spheres.

This research has sought to provide a theoretical contribution to performativity and cultural studies that locates Butler's concept of gender performance (1988) within Griswold's cultural diamond (1978). In the discontinuity of one's gender performance, the acts undergo a conflictual and collective process of deliberation amongst the social actors found in the cultural diamond—the cultural creator, cultural receiver, and cultural object, all anchored in the social world. It is in these disjointed, contentious moments when we may reject the notion that femininity is stable and essential. Rather, we may accept that femininity is a fluctuating representation, for which Barbie serves as our compass.

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